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First Place

I Never Met the Devil

By Jeff Daily  
Aldie, VA

"Agma..." The crackling bed-side speaker sputters to life. "Boss?"

"I'm here." Agma croaks, probing for the light switch. A harsh glare pierces the dingy gloom of her spartan sleeping cubby, illuminating the wide scar covering much of the left side of her face. She brushes her long, black hair aside and presses the palm of her good hand into her disfigured left eye. A headache begins to swell. "What d'ya need Rocky?"

The mechanic's gruff voice returns on the coms. "We're picking up a distress signal."

Agma's blood freezes. "You didn't respond, did you?"

"I'm not that stupid," the man assures her. "What should I do?"

"Start a long-range scan and keep your distance. I'll be up in a minute." Agma awaits her companion's confirmation, then returns to massaging her eye socket. "Just my luck," she groans, then forces herself up. The weary star-pilot pops a couple of pills and rubs her head some more. If these endless salvage operations don't kill her, the headaches certainly will.

The bedraggled salvager finally grabs a prosthetic arm from its hook and begins connecting it smoothly - automatically - in the manner of one that has performed this task a great many times before. The left side of her torso is dominated by a curved metal plate, covering what would otherwise be an open chest cavity with a mere two remaining rib bones and a mechanical lung. The shoulder possesses a mass of coiled synthetic fibers that terminate at a heavy socket, onto which she connects the accompanying arm of similar design.

She gives the arm a swing and flexes the synthetic fingers individually, only to find the smallest two prove unresponsive. "Dammit." Not again. Agma produces a pouch of delicate tools and begins plucking at a bundle of fibers in the forearm. It's getting worse, she knows, and sooner or later she'll have to take it to a real biomech. Of course, Central's done paying out disability, and she's not pulling enough scrap to justify the cost.

Something triggers in the limb's motor controls, and the fingers splay out into a rigid star. The tactile response center fires scrambled messages to the neural link connected directly to her nervous system, adding an unwelcome layer to her headache. "C'mon!" Agma grits her teeth and twists a small screwdriver into the rogue forearm until the fingers relax. The flood of signals fade. Another motion test confirms she has adequate control. Good enough. She composes herself and stands. "Let's see what Rocky's got for me."

Rocky's hunched form twitches uneasily in the pilot's chair. Display screens and back-lit buttons provide the only illumination in the cockpit, bathing his rugged face in a bluish glow. The black expanse of space dominates the old cargo-freighter-turned-salvage-ship's main viewing port, with a single distant star shining just slightly brighter than the others for its proximity. An even "beep-beep-ba-deep" sounds quietly through an overhead speaker. Rocky scratches his shaggy beard and runs dark eyes over scrolling electronic readouts. Any anomaly could spell trouble. His attention is stolen as the hatch behind him clanks open.

"Move." Agma slides into the pilot's seat while Rocky obediently slips back into the navigator's position. They inspect their respective screens and listen to the faint beeping for a moment. "Where's it coming from?"

"Somewhere near solar center," Rocky shrugs, "orbiting around half an A.U., given the degradation cycle."

Agma squints at the dim star through the viewing port. It could be a trap. Or it could be the real thing. Either way, she fights the impulse to simply fire up the super-luminal and hightail to a new system. Nine times out of ten it's a ghost ship, ripe for salvage - god knows she needs the payday - but it's that other 10% that worries her. "Get something to eat, Rock. I'll keep an eye on the scans." The mechanic grunts the affirmative

and squeezes his bulk through the hatch. "And change your clothes. You smell like you died while taking a crap."

"...After a sweaty work-out in the incinerator." Rocky cheekily adds before vanishing.

Agma leans back in her chair and rests her eyes. She lets the distress signal's faint beeping wash over her while exhaustion sets deep in her bones. She could never sleep in this old rust bucket, but when time comes to sleep in a real bed at port, she can't find the nerve to leave her baby, even for a night. Maybe she can get a nap in while the long-range sensors do their work.

A sharp buzz from the console dispels any such possibility. Agma jerks forward and checks the readout. The frequency sweep found something on the radio spectrum. She twists a knob, and a sorrowful, rasping baritone crackles through the speaker, singing a tuneless song.

*"-cold heart, that burning wrath. You took my all, you drank my last... I do not blame you for your thirst, my hubris was what doomed me first... Though if one truth can keep me level..."* The singer pauses to take a few labored breaths. *"It's that I never met the devil."* Another long pause fills the air, and just as Agma begins to suspect he's done, the pained voice returns. "Day 92. This pressure suit is my home... I don't know how much longer the recycler will last... If anybody can hear this message... my name is Cam Larsen... My mining ship, along with the rest of my crew, has died in stable orbit at 0.44 A.U. around HPK5574... Please... someone save my soul."

Agma hovers a synthetic finger over the communicator switch. Does she dare answer this lonely survivor's prayers? A stranded vessel is every spacefarer's worst nightmare. Hesitation, as her eyes slip to the long-range scanner readout. Still incomplete. She slowly withdraws her prosthetic hand and once again lets the faint distress signal fill her ears. He's waited 92 days, she concludes, he can wait a little longer.

It's hours later when the scans complete. Rocky fidgets in the navigator's seat, chewing nervously on a knuckle. He finishes listening to Larsen's recorded plea for a third time, and shakes his head. "Seems legit. Your call." Agma stares motionless at the scanner results, fingers steepled beneath her nose. Readings place Larsen's ship exactly where he claimed, nestled within a thin belt of asteroids. More importantly, no sign of any lurking vessels awaiting a foolish Good Samaritan or an enterprising vulture. Still... Rocky can see the wheels turning in her head. "Somebody else is bound to come by," he offers.

"That's what I'm worried about." She sees the confusion on her companion's face. "Rocky... hear me out..."

Agma fires the reaction control thrusters, bringing the now-massive star into view through the overhead glass. The past three hours since contacting the castaway asteroid-miner have been a testament to orbital dynamic control maneuvers. The skilled pilot taps the forward thrusters, slowing the ship's velocity. She depresses the communicator switch. "Larsen. You should be seeing us off your bow any second."

"I see you." The radio confirms. He's finally calmed his speech, Agma observes. The old man was so overwhelmed by their hail that it took some time to be able to speak through the sobs. "Damn fine vessel!" he adds. Agma suspects he'd say the same about a flying cardboard box, as long as it was strapped to a functioning super-luminal drive.

"Countdown, Rocky."

"15 seconds..." The mechanic carefully studies his console, "Ten seconds... three, two, one, mark!"

Agma fires the rear thrusters, matching the damaged mining vessel's velocity. She squints at an external camera feed and makes small adjustments. Her prosthetic hand seizes unexpectedly for an instant, jerking the

stick too far, but she regains control of the limb before they overshoot their mark. The airlocks align and she kills the roll. "How's that look, prospector?"

"Beautiful!" The audio feed replies.

"I aim to please." The pilot smirks. "Gimme a few minutes to suit up and we'll do this thing. Keep your ear to the feed."

"I assure you, good captain, I'm not going anywhere. Talk to you soon."

Agma cuts the communicator, pinches the bridge of her nose, and stands. She pauses, noticing Rocky's ambivalent expression. "You got a problem with this, now's your last chance to speak up."

Rocky shakes his head. "Naw. I've trusted your judgment six years. If you say we're good, I'm good."

The pilot gives her companion a somber frown. "I didn't say we're good." Rocky swallows hard and contemplates this for a moment. He nods sheepishly.

Agma returns his reluctant nod. "Just keep everything aligned. I'll take care of everything else." The mechanic seems satisfied with this arrangement and Agma leaves him to man the controls. She winds her way through the cramped halls to the airlock. It's a few minutes before she's fully decked out in a pressurized suit. "Rock, patch him through."

She waits a moment for the line to open. A barely audible mumble enters her earpiece. Larsen sings quietly to himself, unaware of his audience. "...*If one truth can keep me level, it's that I never met-*"

Agma clears her throat. Something about the song bothers her. "You ready prospector?"

"Yes. As ready as I'll ever be, captain." There's a nervousness in his voice.

Agma steps into the airlock, rises in the zero-G chamber, and listens to the telltale hum of depressurization. The headache is back, she notes. Maybe it never left, but something in the hum brings it back to that space behind her eye. She instinctively raises a hand to rub it, only to bear a palm uselessly into the helmet's faceplate. She sighs.

The indicator turns green and the dour pilot hits the blinking "OPEN" button. A hatch slides up, and for the first time she's aware of the distance between herself and the small figure floating in the airlock across the way. From the cockpit, the ships seemed inches from collision, but now she finds herself staring across a vast gulf. She sets her jaw and connects her tether's carabiner to a mounting rail. Her heart rate rises, stabbing hard behind her eye with each beat. "You strapped in, Larsen?"

"Strapped in. Ten meters of cord, slip-knotted down to six meters, as ordered." His voice is level, though no less agitated. "I must confess, captain, I've never actually done a 'lock-leap' before."

Agma forces levity in her voice. "Full disclosure, prospector, neither have I. Don't worry, just set your trajectory, wait for my word, and don't jump too hard. Last thing we want to do is knock each other out on contact. We're going for a firm handshake here." She allows herself a smile before the grim determination sets in. "Alright, line up. Jumping in three, two, one, JUMP!"

Larsen kicks off from the airlock into the void. A rush of joy envelopes him. It's finally over. He's going home. The joy quickly drains, though, when he notices the woman across the way hasn't budged, and turns to horror when he spots the plasma pistol rising in her left hand. "No."



The plasma slug punches a clean hole through the face-plate's layered substrate and hits the soft target behind. Agma's earpiece howls as Larsen's life support rapidly depressurizes. It's a long, bellowing cacophony while the compressor fights a doomed battle against the endless vacuum of space.

It's a heartbeat before Agma notices to her dismay a second layer beneath the roar; a cry of mortal pain. It wasn't a clean shot! As she trains the pistol for another round, Larsen reaches the end of his cord and is sling-shot away in a writhing cartwheel. Red droplets speckle Agma's visor.

"No!" The pilot cries out as she tries to find an opening. She squeezes off another charge, but her elbow jerks unexpectedly with a mind of its own, sending the shot wide. A wild torrent of tactile signals pours from her biomechanical arm and the synthetic fingers splay open. The electronic seizure lasts just an instant, but long enough to thrust the pistol into the void. "Damn!" The weapon quickly sails beyond her reach.

A pit sinks in her stomach as her eyes fall on the wounded man pawing feebly at his punctured face-plate. The sounds, distorted by rapid pressure changes, take on an unnatural and infernal tone. She turns away from her despicable work. "Rocky... kill the feed." The line quickly falls silent. Only the woman's pounding heart remains in her ears.

After what feels like ages, Rocky's voice cuts through the tense silence. "Agma? ...Boss?"

The pilot's eyes focus on the red droplets on her face-plate. She wipes them with a bulky sleeve, but succeeds in only smearing them. She finally looks back out the airlock opening. The prospector's body floats lifelessly at the end of its line. Her headache seems rather distant now. "Rocky..." she struggles to say anything through her dry mouth, then swallows hard, "get on the grappling arm. Lock us into the ship and let's start the salvage. Once we're secured, priority is to shut down that distress signal."

"Larsen already shut it down," the mechanic informs her. "I guess he figured..."

"...he was saved." Agma looks across the gap at the prospector's broken helmet. She touches her prosthetic hand to her own visor, a subconscious desire to caress the scar around her eye. She reminds herself what this salvage can buy. The deed is done, now it's time to take the cold prize bought with an old man's life.

"You alright?" Rocky's voice seems feeble and distant over the radio. Agma knows she wasn't the only one hearing the terrible death throes. Rocky had known what they were doing, but that still didn't prepare him for the reality of it.

"It wasn't clean," she sighs, "I botched the shot. Decompression... I've seen it before. Nobody should go like that." She waits for Rocky's response, unsure if she'd prefer absolution or disgust. He remains silent. "That song he was singing... 'I never met the devil.' I've been thinking about it. Thinking of my time with Central Peace Enforcement." She can't help but chuckle mirthlessly at the irony of the name.

"We were brought onto an orbital refinery to crack down on a crime ring nestled in with the local laborers. Our team had already gotten a reputation for dealing with tough cases, but this was something else. Day one, I got promoted when my C.O. took a scatter-shot on the chin. It was on me to respond and respond I did." She watches starlight reflect off the dead man's broken faceplate. "The resulting campaign ended six months and 115 bodies later. No home untouched. No family unbroken. I waged a war and tore a hole in that community that's gonna take generations to heal." She grimaces. A pang of regret, even now. "Those people gave me my name, Rocky. It's what I still call myself today... Agma. It means 'Devil'."



Second Place

Shattered Glass  
By Erin Price  
Sterling, VA

The broken pieces weren't as rough and jagged as she expected. They're mocking me, Rosa thought, touching a smooth shard with her extended finger. She wanted them to stab her.

Before she had even picked up the figurine, Rosa knew she was going to drop it. Somehow, she knew something so beautiful, so perfect, couldn't stay whole when she touched it.

Shaking, Rosa looked at the smooth, walnut desk where the figurine had sat. It had been carefully placed next to a candle and a picture of St. Anthony of Padua, the patron saint of fertility and lost items.

The shrine must be for decoration, Rosa thought, a meager attempt to hold on to a religion and heritage long forgotten. She couldn't imagine the wealthy, Americanized Señora Rodriguez actually worshipping there. Still, breaking the Virgin Mary wasn't just destruction; it was a kind of omen.

All she had wanted was to pick up the figurine, to dust under it. It was beautiful, sitting untouched on the walnut desk, sending out rays of rainbow light when the sun hit it just right. She had clutched it tighter to protect it, but it fell from her grip and somersaulted to the floor.

Rosa's gaze swept across the living room's perfect features: the ornate fireplace, the plush furniture, the antique grandfather clock in the corner. Had the family always been this wealthy? They must have a grandmother somewhere down the line who was like her—a cleaning lady who had broken a figurine of the Virgin Mary.

Rosa's hands trembled as she picked up the glass pieces from the floor with her naked fingers. She glanced behind her, worried that Señora Rodriguez might suddenly appear to rage and scream at her. The Rodriguezes knew she didn't have papers. They had to know. They were from Mexico, too, but they weren't like her—they had been in *Los Estados Unidos* their entire lives. Who knew what they would do, what they would say? One damaged figurine could be a one-way ticket back to Zacatecas. And just like that, her children's future would be shattered like the pieces of broken glass on the living room carpet.

Rosa looked behind her again, sweat dripping from her brow. In one breath, she opened a drawer of the walnut desk and put the glass fragments inside.

She glanced around the room and saw the effects of her work: the translucent windows now free of breath marks, the perfectly even vacuumed carpet stripes. She had done good work for them, always good work. Wasn't it enough to make up for one little figurine? Even if it was *la virgen*?

Carolina Rodriguez looked at the smiling faces of her best friends and thought about how much she hated her life.

She watched Susana, sitting in a chair of honor at the center of the room, opening gifts of tiny baby clothes. The other women surrounded her, swapping pregnancy stories and giggling.

Trying not to cry, Carolina looked down at her shoes: turquoise pumps, \$200 at Nordstrom. They matched her turquoise blouse, hidden under a black suit jacket.

She was dressed for the courtroom, not for her little sister's baby shower. But who could fault her? She earned more in a day than Susana earned in a month. She and Josué had a large home in an upscale neighborhood. She had achieved the American dream—but it wasn't her dream.

She looked at Susana, laughing as she opened a pack of baby onesies. She felt a sharp pain in her stomach as she remembered the kind of life she wanted for herself.

There was no one who could give her that life. Not the infertility doctors, those so-called experts, who had shaken their heads at her and told her in hushed voices how sorry they were. A lawyer's income could not buy her way to motherhood.

"You're so lucky," Susana always said. "You're free. You can take on the world. You don't have to worry about anyone but your husband and yourself."

*Lucky, am I? Carolina thought. Even the cleaning lady has two children, and she's 24 and single and barely makes enough money to feed them. I got all the luck I didn't want, but none of the luck I wanted.*

It was stupid and naïve to keep hoping, especially now that Carolina was nearing forty. But every day she kneeled in front of her glass Virgin Mary figurine and prayed for a child. Carolina wouldn't call herself a believer, but there was something about that figurine, the way it sparkled in the sunlight, that made it seem almost alive. When she saw the figurine sparkle like that, she could almost believe that her prayers were being heard.

But then there was another negative pregnancy test, and her hopes were shattered again.

It might all be over, Rosa remembered as she picked up a tortilla between her thumb and index finger and flipped it to the other side. Our life here, our home, the boys' future. Everything.

Rosa added the tortilla to the growing stack. Behind her, Carlos and Andrés colored pictures at the kitchen table. A novella blared from the television just a foot away. It was life in the tiny camper trailer that she called home.

It wasn't much, but it was better than her old home in Zacatecas. Better than her job begging tourists to buy knock-off jewelry. And best of all, better than life with Esteban. He had seemed so perfect at first, like the romantic lead in a novella. She had thought she found a man who wasn't like her father—and then he turned out to be exactly like her father.

She was happy to be in the States now, but Rosa couldn't help wishing for something even better. As she watched her sons fighting over a blue crayon, she thought about them going to college someday, becoming lawyers or doctors maybe. And with one stupid mistake, one Virgin Mary figurine, her dreams might never come to be.

Rosa prayed that the Rodriguezes would be understanding, that the glass figurine didn't mean much to them. They didn't seem all that religious anyway. Perhaps it had been given to them by some aunt they barely knew. Maybe they wouldn't even realize it was gone.

But Rosa shook her head as she set the tortillas on the table next to the rice and beans. No one puts a glass figurine they don't care about at the center of their living room. "How could she do it? I trusted her! I even gave her a key to come in when I wasn't home!" Carolina gripped the steering wheel, breathing hard. She couldn't believe that young cleaning lady with the large, innocent brown eyes had broken her Virgin Mary figurine and hidden the pieces in the desk drawer.

Carolina knew that Rosa didn't have any papers, and she was trying to support two children on a tiny income. So why would she do such a stupid thing? She should know better!

Did Rosa break her Virgin Mary on purpose? Was she making fun of her, rubbing her status as a mother in Carolina's face? Carolina had to find out.

Carolina knew Rosa lived on the other side of town, but she wasn't prepared at how "other" the other side really was. She drove through a bumpy back road, passing trailer park after trailer park. Carolina

passed a battered old pickup truck, rusting in the sun. She passed an old woman with tattered clothes who held the hand of a shoe-less child.

Carolina pulled into Quiet Grove trailer park and drove until the headlights of her Escalade brightened what she knew was Rosa's trailer. It was hardly the size of Carolina's front room. In front of the trailer sat two cracked plastic chairs and a kid's bike with a missing wheel. A chip in the front window had been hastily fixed with duct tape. A dollar-store sign on the door read *Bienvenidos*.

An image sailed through Carolina's mind of the apartment her family lived in when they first moved to the United States. The paint peeled and the door didn't shut all the way, but Carolina's parents were proud of it. They were proud to have made it to this country, to finally be able to call it their home.

At age seven, Carolina hadn't noticed the apartment's flaws. She was caught up in the vision of her parents' American dream. But now, she thought about the squeaking of the door, the peeling of the paint. She was the woman who had worked her way through law school with scholarships and grit. She had achieved her parents' American dream, but she felt hollow. She wished she could be that wide-eyed seven-year-old again.

Carolina got out of her car and walked toward the front door, even though she had no idea what she was going to say.

Rosa didn't feel fear at first—only confusion. Señora Rodriguez looked so out of place standing on her front porch. She wore an expensive suit and heels and a deep shade of red lipstick. Her expression was hard to read, like stone.

She knew about the figurine. Why else would she come? But Rosa had expected a phone call telling her she was fired, perhaps threats about reporting her to the police. She hadn't expected her boss to show up at her home, mocking her with her expensive clothes.

"Mommy, who's she?" Andrés held onto Rosa's legs and peered at Señora Rodriguez.

Señora Rodriguez looked down at Andrés, and her eyes softened. "Perhaps we could speak outside?" she asked.

Rosa nodded and spoke to Andrés. "Can you get out your trucks and play with your brother? Mommy needs to talk to la Señora."

Andrés nodded and ran off, and Rosa stepped outside and closed the door. She gestured to the chairs in front of the trailer and noticed her hands were shaking. Why did the chairs have to be broken? She waited for la Señora to sit down, and then she sat down next to her. She clutched the arms of the chair and waited for the words she knew were coming.

Señora Rodriguez looked down at her hands, examining her manicured fingernails. "You have an adorable little boy," she said.

Her Spanish sounded harsh—it didn't flow like the Spanish of the wealthy class. Señora Rodriguez had come far in life, Rosa realized. But why was she avoiding talking about the figurine? Did she want Rosa to confess?

"I always wanted children, you know." Señora Rodriguez's dark eyes filled with longing. She crossed her legs in front of her and looked out at the bright colors of the Arizona sunset.

Rosa didn't say anything, didn't know what to say. She hadn't realized a woman like Señora Rodriguez could want anything, really. Why wasn't Señora Rodriguez yelling at her, telling her she never wanted to see her again? Isn't that why she was here? Rosa couldn't take it anymore, the waiting.

"I'm sorry about your Virgin Mary. It fell while I was dusting. I will work to make up the cost."

She held her breath, but Señora Rodriguez didn't explode with anger like Rosa expected. She just sighed, distant, like Rosa was speaking a language she didn't understand. Then she shook her head. "It's okay. I don't need it anymore. I don't think she was listening anyway."

Rosa felt like she couldn't catch her breath. The Señora really didn't care about her broken figurine? She wanted to ask about her job, but the Señora was in a strange mood, so instead, she waited. All was silent in the trailer park except for the distant sound of a cat mewing. In the trailer across the way, a light clicked off in the window.

Señora Rodriguez lifted her chin to the sky and sighed again. "Do you think the Virgin Mary knows what it's like to long for a child? She got a child without even trying to have one."

Rosa shivered even though the air was warm. She felt that the Señora was getting close to insulting the Virgin, and she didn't like it.

"I think the Virgin understood what it was like to have a life she didn't expect." Rosa's words hung in the air. She regretted saying them to a superior.

Señora Rodriguez turned toward Rosa, smiling. "What about you, Rosa? What do *you* want from life?"

No one had ever asked Rosa that question, but she felt the answer was obvious.

"I want something different than this," she said, gesturing to the trailer park around them. "If not for me, then at least for my sons." She felt strange confessing her dreams to someone like Señora Rodriguez, but the Señora nodded like she understood.

Señora Rodriguez stood abruptly. She extended her hand to Rosa, and Rosa took it. Her hand felt soft and warm. It reminded her of how it felt to hold hands with her older sister when she was a child.

"I'll see you on Monday." Señora Rodriguez's wide smile made her look like a younger version of herself, like someone who still believed in dreams. Watching her boss smile, hearing that she could keep her job, Rosa thought she could hold on to her dreams just a little longer.

As she watched the Señora walk away, Rosa said prayers of gratitude under her breath. Rosa's prayers left her lips and blew through the air toward Señora Rodriguez, who paused and turned back to Rosa. "And it's about time I gave you a raise," she called. She stepped in her car, turned the ignition, and pulled away.

Rosa looked out at the sky's fading pink. She thought about want and regret and the tiny pieces of the Virgin Mary, hiding and waiting to be put back together again.





Third Place

The Floating Spork  
By Taylor Thackaberry  
Blacksburg, VA

“Houston to Novus. Come in, Novus.”

I don’t know how long the radio has been trying to contact me. Probably a while, and I’m surprised they haven’t given up yet. As I start to wake up out of my fog, I fumble for my receiver. It’s floating somewhere to my right, tethered by a bungee cord.

“Novus to Houston. I hear you loud and clear,” I say. Do they want some sort of status report, or is my voice good enough? Before me is a labyrinth of buttons, gauges, and switches. A few warning lights are blinking, but after flicking a few switches back to their rightful places, they stop. “What happened? How long was I out?”

“Two hours and thirty-six minutes,” Mission Control can’t help but let her relief into her voice. “There was an unexpected asteroid field, and autopilot took over—the G forces must have been too much.” I suddenly feel constricted in my harness and I pull it off my shoulders. “It takes a lot more than that to kill me, Houston.”

“You were supposed to start preparations for orbit and descent an hour ago,” she scolds me, as if blacking out was my fault. Even though Mission Control nags me like the wife I never had, I unclip the radio and jam it onto the waistband of my pants for safekeeping. I float above my seat in zero g and push off the console for some forward velocity into the main hull of the ship. No matter the decade, NASA’s interior design team always thinks gunmetal grey and sterile white are in vogue. Mission Control’s voice follows me as we drift past the kitchen, the bathroom, the exercise deck.

“Don’t forget to check the fuel levels of the boosters. And the oxygenator,” she insists. Reminds? Nags.

“I’m not an idiot. I remember the checklist.” Opening one of the maintenance panels, it’s clear to see that the fuel and oxygen levels are good. Probably a little on the over-oxygenated side, since I’ve been asleep and breathing less. It will adjust.

“Did you remember to strap down the loose kitchen items?” A rogue spork floats in front of my face and I grab it before it punctures something important. Does she have cameras watching me?

Poking my head into the kitchen, I see an army of sporks spinning and twisting through the air. One or two of the cabinets must have come unlocked during the turbulence, and now everything has escaped. The kitchen itself is not very large: table for one, a counter for food prep, a rehydrator, a microwave. There’s a small window, too, and as I try to sweep the escaped sporks into a box, I catch my first look at the blue speck that is my destination. Sure, we had the specs from satellites like *Hospitality* and *Regeneration*, even some grainy photos of the surface. But nothing—absolutely nothing—compares to seeing it with my own eyes. The surface is vast and blue, with green ridges of land and cloudlike water patterns (thank you, terraforming protozoa). That blue is more vibrant than any photo is capable of capturing. And in a binary system, this planet has longer summers than winters, promising a long and plentiful growing season. I catch myself staring at it for longer than I should, earning a prod from Mission Control.

“Novus? Are you listening to me?” she asks. “You’re running out of time.”

“Sorry. Just got my first look at it,” I turn away from the window and toss the sporks into a cabinet, locking it this time. “It’s beautiful. Neither words nor pictures can describe. I wish you could see those oceans!”

“It better be beautiful. We paid good money for those oceans,” she sounds dismissive. “Focus on the task at hand. You need to readjust your course for orbit or you’ll never see the planet.”

I shut the blinds on the window and focus completely on the checklist. I can't readjust the course yet, too many things to do. But after all these months in space, all I want to do is stand on the coastline and breathe in the salty air.

I grew up on the banks of the Chesapeake Bay, out on the water with my family and friends almost every day. We sailed up and down the Eastern Shore, and I was recruited in college for the sailing team. My father always thought I became a pilot because of my time on the water. The government has countless marine bases and testing grounds by the bay. Airplanes flew overhead while we were at sail, and my father (always the Naval officer) knew everyone by name. Soon, I did too. I couldn't help but follow in his footsteps. Even NASA had property close by, so I never had to stray far from my beloved bay. When I did, traveling to Beijing for intensive astronaut training, the rotten, salty smell of the water of home haunted me. Not until I smelled it again did I feel at peace.

I spent my last day on Earth walking that coastline, barefoot, with my father. Most people don't go barefoot along the shore, since the beaches aren't the prettiest. Scarred with jagged rocks and discarded oyster shells, not to mention the beach glass from long-forgotten bottles. Unless we're talking about ships, planes, or the Baltimore Orioles, my father is usually sparse with words. But that day, he was very talkative.

"When people came to settle in America, they chose these shores, you know," he said. Greying but not frail, my father's voice was still as deep and well-spoken as it had been in his Navy days. "First it was Jamestown, then Williamsburg, then all of western civilization. The seeds of forward thinking were planted here. And the world has never been the same since."

A clump of invasive algae twirled in an eddy made by one of the rocks. A chip bag floated amongst the flotsam, and my father bent with difficulty at the hip to pick it up. He held it at arm's length, repulsed. "Western civilization is about moving forward, but at the expense of the past. It's killing this bay, the very thing that brought them here, that made this all possible. Where did we go wrong?"

I try to do each job patiently, diligently, although I'm starting to become aware that there isn't enough time. Mission Control keeps counting down, making me nervous. Detach the capsule's fuel from the spaceflight tank to the descent tank. Pack food supplies into capsule. Shut down non-essential systems. Eject waste from the bathroom so it doesn't come up again. As a sailor, I learned that sailing solo meant you had to take responsibility for every action, accept the consequences when you cut corners. Autopilot can get the ship into orbit, but if I'm not ready for the launch from the capsule, it could spell disaster. Warning lights are starting to pop up around the ship. Mission Control has upgraded from nagging to nearly panicking. "You need to get to the capsule and prepare for takeoff. It's going to leave without you!"

"I'm not finished yet!" If something goes wrong—if I forget to turn on life support for the capsule or detach from the ship properly, I'll burn up in the atmosphere and I'll never get to see those sparkling blue shores. I desperately sprint from one end of the ship to the other, slipping my space suit over my pants and fumbling with the gloves.

"You only have one shot! If you miss it, you're dead!" Her voice is muffled slightly underneath the suit, but the sentiment is still very clear. I fumble with the airtight zipper on my cool suit, hands shaking. The doors start to shut as I drift into the capsule and the countdown begins. It's down to five by the time my suit is complete and secure, and when it hits one, I only have one of my harnesses on.

My head snaps back and my left shoulder lurches upwards with a painful wrench as the capsule deploys from the rest of the ship. Orbiting around a planet, you're technically in free fall—that's why you feel weightless. But with the boosters attached to this rocket shooting me into the atmosphere, I do feel like I'm falling. The strap I didn't connect flaps uselessly, beating against the chair and my helmet. I try to grab it, but my shoulder can't move—must be dislocated by the initial launch. There's nothing to do but grit my teeth

and listen to the rockets blasting, the sound of a thousand warning alarms on the console. As much as I want to address each warning, my vision fades in and out, like a faded movie on a projector. There's more black than color before me, and a hissing sound—is it coming from a leaky hose, or is it just the static you hear before you pass out? I am a fireball, shooting through the atmosphere. I will either be the first to live here, or the first to die.

My vision starts to return and I can read the warning at last. CRITICAL ENGINE FAILURE—DANGEROUS DESCENT VELOCITY—ABORT MISSION. I reach under my seat with my good arm and remember what the bottom of the checklist told me to do—if all else fails, abort.

I pull the eject lever and suddenly instead of falling, I'm flying. The capsule goes one way and I go another. It doesn't feel any less dangerous until the parachute deploys, yanking me back up to a slower descent. It's too late to do any real assistance, though, and I tumble out of the chair as it deposits me onto the ground. I roll three times over my injured shoulder before coming to a complete stop in the sand.

If I'm not falling anymore, then why do I still feel dizzy, and hear alarms? My suit is trying to warn me of something. Then I see the gaping hole on my shoulder. The initial launch must have ripped it when my shoulder dislocated. But somehow, even though my suit, capsule, and chair are broken, Mission Control's radio is still working.

"The air needs to be tested, do not breathe it—it could contain deadly compounds undetected by the probes!" Mission Control insists. There's a leak in my suit, filling my breathing space with too much nitrogen. It's making me woozy, so I unscrew my helmet and pull it off my head before life support can suffocate me. The air here seems fine—clean, even. At least, it isn't killing me yet. I throw my busted helmet off to the side and slump in the sand. The atmosphere is plenty thick, and the two suns warm my face. I slip off my gloves, my life support, and crumple it all into a pile.

High above me in the blue sky, a trail of smoke draws a crooked line—kind of like the cloud trails left by the planes at home. I trace it down until I see the crash site in the river. The capsule is on fire, probably a malfunction by the overworked landing jets, sinking by the minute. A trail of oil leaks from the side. It forms a silky sheen on the surface of the blue water. The sheen grows larger and larger. I jog towards the shore, eager to touch the water, to sink my toes in the sand and splash around. But as I get closer, the sight and smell of the oil repulses me. Something bobs to the surface and a wave kicks it towards my feet—one of the lost sporks. I bend down to pick it up, remembering the look of disgust on my father's face when he found the chip bag. This beautiful ocean, all this work we put into finding it and building it better—I can't help but stare at the oil, the spork, and my own bare feet, and feel like I'm back where all of this started. I am the first to step on this beach, the first to see a new world and shape a new chapter in the history of humanity.

My father held the chip bag out at arm's length towards me. "Where did we go wrong?" he asked. The watery sunlight reflected off the reflective interior as I realized his moral. "We forgot where we came from."

He crumpled the bag in his hands, wringing it. "Humans can have all the ingenuity in the world, all the best luck—but we won't get anywhere if we keep making the same mistakes."

Sitting on this new beach, on this new world, I fall to the ground. I clutch the spork so tightly that my knuckles turn white and I start to cry.

## Honorable Mentions



Due  
By Amy Robert Karam  
Fairfax, VA

I've never touched an authentic false-face mask before. He's my first, cradled in packaging, going home to the Iroquois. He and I are unlikely kin; we each occupy space on this human world without ever belonging to it. Did he just wink at me, sly spirit? Or is random light from the office reflecting off his metal-clad eyes? Those eyes have watched me grow—each shed of the old me. He has silently accepted the different faces I've worn. But now it's time for us to say goodbye. He'll miss the one I'll uncover tonight, the by-product of my genetic heritage. I remember kinder days from long ago, like when Mom introduced us. He was mounted on the wall back then, and I was mounted on the ground—where I always seem to be.

Max's shop isn't open often, and it's never crowded. The only voices today are from a Get Smart laugh track streaming from the office. Max is rummaging back there under fluorescent lamps. But the showroom remains dim, even with hanging artwork and other crafts lit by spotlight. I was never sure for whom these things were being displayed. I'm still waiting for a trove of customers to materialize from Max's enthusiasm, and so is he.

The mask's horsehair catches the corners of my nails. I've got to get home. It's starting soon. "Max, do you need any help in there?" I call out. "It's taking a while. Maybe I can..." My index finger is bleeding, but I can't find a Band-Aid in my purse.

Max emerges from the back with a slip of paper. "Cricket, I love how you can offer your help and at the same time hint at my failings. Here's the ingredients list for the bath, and I've added a few extras because we're all kinder and gentler now, in case you didn't know. Make sure the water's not too hot, and don't forget to protect your eyes."

It's a more complicated formula than I expect. "Four gallons of apple cider vinegar? Like no one's going to notice me buying so much?" I'm trying to hide the fact that I don't recognize half the stuff listed, let alone where to get it. Anthraquinone emodin?

He rolls his eyes at me. "It's not like it's weapons-grade plutonium, Cricket. If anyone asks—I don't know—say you need it for a vat of pickles or something. They aren't going to care. Lane runs a market on Mount Hope. You can stop there on the way home—he's got gallon jugs in the back and the rest of what you'll need. He'll help you load everything into your car if your hands are starting to get raw. You know that's the first sign, right? How're your nails?"

I don't want to show him. I don't want anyone to see my brittle nails or my clouded eyes or the peeling crowns of my ears. "I'm fine, Max. I remember from last time well enough, believe me. You said 'Lane' was the guy's name? You have the address?"

Max crosses his arms and says, "You'd know the address if you ever came to the association meetings."

I don't have an answer for that. Not today. "Just...write it down for me, would you? What about the smell? You got anything to help with it?"

He's suddenly giddy. "Oh! Check this out!" Max goes into the office but comes right out. He's holding a canister and sets it on the counter across from me. "It's one of the new foggers—it's so little! Just pop it outta the can and warm it on the stovetop. Make sure you start it up *before* you get into the tub. I actually—now, don't tell anyone this—kinda stole it from a new member who just came down from Canada,

Toronto. But, really, those guys are so accommodating; it's like siphoning piety from a priest. He's fresh out of his fifth, not that bad looking. You want me to write down his address, too?"

Max never likes my out-group boyfriends. "No, I don't want his address. Too old. And I've told you, I don't want to be with someone who knows I'll be coming due. He might be expecting an upgrade."

He isn't impressed. I can tell by the way he shifts his attention away from me. The truth is I don't really mind Max's opinions. He's the only one who ever gives me any.

Then Max changes the subject, sort of. "Have you already taken care of the job? What about those nosey tenants in your building? You talk to the manager about switching the lease over to your...what'd you pick, aunt?"

I need something from Max, but I'm positive this isn't it. "I know what to do. I know the indications and all the precautions. I bought a wig just in case, and just half an hour ago, I ate my last meal as a regular at Rocky's, at least as one they'll recognize. I'm sure...I'm sure I've thought of everything." I'm trying to keep it together. I don't want to act like a child in front of him. But I'm alone, and due, and I can't control anything about it, even if we pretend I can.

Somehow Max understands my welling eyes and hollow words. He says, "You know, this happens all over the world. Every day, one of us is always coming due."

I shouldn't, but I ask him a question I already have the answer for. "Can you be there with me, at least at the start? Or maybe the finish is better. Can you?" I've never heard my voice so small.

He assures me, "You know I can't do that, Cricket. It's against doctrine—family only."

"But I don't have any family, and...and you said you stole the fogger—that's against doctrine, too. You didn't seem to have a problem with that!" My loneliness has gradually seeped into his expression. I didn't mean for it to happen. I shut up mid-rant and find the most honest thing I can say. "I'm not trying to pick a fight, Max."

"Baby, it's okay." He comes over to stand beside me. I wish he'd put his arm around me, or hold my hand, but I'm sure he won't. "Maybe it isn't fair that you have to face this alone. But I'll be there as soon as I can after; you can count on me for that." I just nod because nothing else can easily work itself out. Max says, "Take it from me; your fourth is never as traumatic as the third. Hey, I'm due for my sixth next November, and look how awesome I've turned out so far!" I smile, deliberately, for both of us.

He asks me if the aura has started yet, but it hasn't. Then he has to remind me of what he believes to be most important. "There'll be a burning, right at the base of your neck, in the back. When that happens, it's time for a last look in the mirror and final adulations before getting into the tub."

"Why should I bother? They never listen."

"Cricket, Baby, they listen. And they'll listen right then because it's as close as we ever get to them. We're special to them. We're like..." Max looks around his shop for a moment, scrutinizing. He stops abruptly and turns back to me. "Remember camping at the Lakes, just at the start of winter, when you were little?" I tell him I remember the smell and the cold. Satisfied, he goes on, "Okay, now picture the rows of trees, acres and acres of frosted soldiers. Imagine that one, only one tree out of all of them, is covered with multicolored lights—kinda like a kaleidoscope. And it's wearing a dome of snow, so the colors all blend together. It stands there, glowing and proud, the keeper of a secret. You are one of those lights on that tree, Cricket, unique among the anointed. Tell me, Baby, what color are you?"



“Green. The kind of green that smells like the rain, but before it comes down.” I’m not sure how I know it, but I do.

“That’s it. And your green light is shining, reflecting within the snow and mixing with all the other colors. Our tree isn’t complete without you. Don’t get me wrong—it’s changing all the time. Lights ignite, lights frizzle, balance is maintained, and those who are due burn the brightest for a few, precious hours. We need you to endure this. It’s our penance, our collective gift to those who allow us to linger here.” He goes back behind the counter, slowly.

“Max,” I ask, “what color was Mom?”

He stops moving for a few seconds, and then lets go of a long, sweet breath. He doesn’t face me. “Nikki? Nikki was red, the kind of red you’re not sure is there at first, you can’t see until you’re close, the kind that feels warm, and sticky, and soothes your eyes. There’ll never be another color like hers.”

Max misses Mom as much as I do. That’s worth believing, even without proof.

I have to go. Max asks me to text him when I’m dry, and I will. I pass shells of buildings, both young and old, to find my badly parked car. I tell myself that after tonight, the city will mostly stay the same. The river will run to the falls, the tree roots will inflate the sidewalks, and the lilacs will season the breeze. I find comfort in these promises.

It’s a hard time shuttling the load up to my apartment. But it’s a quiet trial with everyone else deep in the workday. I have to stop on the third-floor landing during my second trip. The air suddenly shifts, and I lose my balance slightly. A peach scent floats by. It reminds me, I’m unsure of what, and my memories chase it around with blind optimism. But the odor sours, and I finish my work. I lock the door behind me—the division between the ordinary and my kind’s peculiarity.

In the tub, the solution is easier to mix than its ingredients are to pronounce. I set the burner on low and close the vents leading away from my space. The wall color looks different with the blinds filtering the dipping sun’s light. No. It’s me, not the wall, or the sun. And then I feel an itch. When I rub, the skin stings and I can’t tell if the flakes are from my neck or the fingers that touched it. I bow down on a little rug. I bought it last week for some other, silly reason.

I kneel like I should, but not why I’m supposed to. My belief isn’t strong, and there’s no one here to impress or appease. My reasons are purely selfish. I want Mom to see. And if she can, she has to know when to look. This could be my only way to her. She has to notice me down here, in the middle of everything that lives and moves and changes. If she doesn’t pay attention now, she might miss me completely and not be able to find me again. That’s not a chance I can take. So, I sing my adulations with a voice I hope she’ll recognize and be proud of.

The tub water is warm and surrounds me more calmly than air. I didn’t look in the mirror on my way in; it doesn’t matter anymore, maybe it never did. I squeeze my eyes and lungs until they’re tight, and then submerge briefly for a coating. I try to calculate how long it took last time. But I’m bigger now, so there’s more surface area to consider.

I soak, still and waiting. I don’t let my mind wander beyond what my skin can feel. Then a shiver starts to grow, more on the inside than out. It’s a tingle that triggers an irresistible, foreign posture. This is always the most awkward part, muscles and joints being coaxed into unfamiliar attitudes. And the buzzing, gnawing away behind my eyes—that’s the worst of it. But this prelude doesn’t last long.

The peak topples with some sloshing and my fingers squeaking against the tub's surface. The buzzing wanes along with my heart rate, a siren that's passed into the distance. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but I feel a relief I probably don't deserve. My eyes are slowly focusing again, and I crane my neck to read the clock on my nightstand. The hand moves another minute forward. It's time for the undoing. I check my nape, spread the gap, and start the roll.

I'm relieved to feel hair underneath, but the color will be hard to discern while wet. I wipe my eyes with a washcloth after the peel passes over, but I close them again and assist the process by touch only. Nature takes command, and I soon feel symmetric rushes along my arms and across my hips. It's a clean sweep, and very little residue lags behind. My feet are finally released. I push the expelled mass up against the curve of the tub, kneading it together with my toes. Now, at the end of it all, it feels best to lie back in the warmth.

Instinct eventually forces me out and into towels. I blot them on my body and start taking an inventory. Like always, the basic structure remains. There's a novel tightness across my cheeks, and the scars along my forearm are gone.

That catches me off guard. I think I might miss those lines that helped define me. They had been a group of old friends, solemn and knowing. Their absence is as significant as their deliberate creation. Something more than my reflection has changed, and I wonder where new scars are destined to appear.

I need Mom the most right now—not just who she was in the middle, the summer of our lives together, but who she was in the end. Every smile she offered, every face she wore, they all spoke with the candor that made our existence bearable, even enviable. She knew what mattered, and I may have forgotten. It isn't too late. Inside, I'm the one she loved, and that hasn't changed. My greatest tribute to her is to believe in the light I offer. This is a new beginning in the most profound sense. It's my chance to try again, whether I'm entitled to it or not, to be better. Max was wrong. This isn't a gift I award to some mystical force. It's one I've been given.

And on this first day, the mirror agrees. My mother's beautiful face is smiling back at me.

Guess Who's Coming to Easter  
By Faydra D. Fields  
Woodbridge, VA

"Babe, trust me. Everything's going according to plan," Keenan said in a low voice so as not to be overheard in the kitchen by his grandfather and grandmother from his grandparents' den while talking to Connie on his cellphone.

As Connie replied, Keenan turned down the volume so Connie's voice wouldn't resound throughout the close quarters of his grandparents' home. He knew the loud hum of the refrigerator obscured some sound, but he wasn't sure how much.

To Connie's concerns, Keenan replied, "Yes, I want them to love you as much as I do, but it won't matter if they don't because..."

"Keenan?! Breakfast!" His grandmother yelled from the kitchen, but it wasn't her usual, carefree sing-song call to breakfast.

"...it won't affect how I feel about you," Keenan said. "I told you... As far as Grandma is concerned, no one's good enough for me."

Keenan had flown cross-country to Virginia to spend the Easter holiday weekend with his grandparents and to share some news with them that he knew would be hard for them to accept.

"I'm an atheist," he'd told them as his grandparents sat side-by-side on their sofa.

Keenan's grandmother had said nothing for a few seconds and then she exploded into uncontrollable tears. As his grandfather pulled his wife to him and she rested her head on his shoulder, Keenan explained to them how he'd arrived at his decision that there is no God.

After Keenan finished explaining, his grandfather eyed him suspiciously and asked only one question: "If you're an atheist, what are you doing here?"

"I don't believe there is a God, but I believe in family. I know this observance is important to you and Grandma, so I came home like I do every year out of respect for your beliefs and my love for my family. Family is everything to me. Nothing will change that," Keenan said to his grandfather while his grandmother continued to cry.

After the revelation Keenan had shared with them on Maundy Thursday, it was all his grandmother could do to be civil towards him. He knew she was wounded and angry, because he hadn't heard her hum a single hymn in three days. He also knew that she was praying incessantly.

As for his grandfather, Keenan wasn't sure how the old man felt. Granddad usually chose to keep his own counsel, and Keenan was aware that his grandfather knew him better than anyone else in the entire world. Granddad intimated as much when Keenan asked him on Saturday evening what Granddad thought, and the old man had said, "An atheist, huh? Well, we'll see."

It was Sunday morning, and Keenan listened to Connie's next question and said, "Yes. Go with that. Cream and pastel yellow are perfect choices for Easter Sunday."

Connie asked another question, and Keenan said, "Listen... They won't care about your skin color. Granddad's congregation has been a human rainbow for as long as I can remember, which is saying a lot when you consider where they live, and you know I practically grew up in that church."

Keenan's grandfather, a pastor, and his grandmother had raised him since he was three when his grandmother had refused to give him back to his parents after they'd left him and disappeared for three months.

His grandfather, a terse man when he wasn't in the pulpit, told them, "You're welcome to visit anytime." That had settled Keenan's living arrangements all the way through graduate school and until Keenan moved to the West Coast to work in Silicon Valley.

"Just give the paper to the driver, babe," Keenan said. "He'll know exactly where to go."

As he listened to Connie chatter nervously, Keenan inhaled deeply and exhaled as quietly as possible. He was still getting accustomed to being in a relationship with a worry-wart. Keenan never worried. He wouldn't get worked up about things he couldn't control, but Connie worried endlessly. Keenan cut in and said, "Babe. Stop worrying. Let me get off before..."

"Keenan?! The eggs!" His grandmother's voice was harder this time.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm coming," Keenan yelled out to his grandmother. "Babe, I gotta go." Keenan stood up from the couch. "I love you more. I'll see you in a few hours. Bye."

Keenan pressed END on his cellphone, put it in the left pocket of his pajama bottoms and traversed the five steps from the living room into the kitchen.

"Pastor," Keenan said in greeting to his grandfather, who was sitting at the table reading his newspaper.

"Son," his grandfather said in his usual return greeting.

There was a cup of coffee in front of the old man but no food. His grandfather chose to eat after he preached. "When my stomach starts growling, it's time to start wrapping up my sermon," Granddad had told a ten-year-old Keenan when he'd asked his grandfather why he didn't eat before church.

"Morning, Grandma," Keenan said as he sat in his usual seat at the table.

The only sound that greeted him back was the humming of the refrigerator.

She had her back to him as she stood at the stove fixing his plate. Even in her anger, her sense of duty dictated that she serve him. She said, "I got your suit from the dry cleaner's, and I ironed your shirt, tie and yellow pocket square for nothing, I guess."

"Grandma. I don't have a problem attending service today. I told you that."

"Seems like a waste of time to me," his grandmother said icily.

When she turned around, he could tell she was only looking in his direction, not at him. When she walked over and put his plate down in front of him, Keenan lightly grasped her wrist and pulled her gently down and kissed her cheek. When he was done, she broke his loose grip, walked back over to the stove and fixed her own plate.

Keenan didn't pick up his fork. He waited for her, as usual.

When she turned around and saw him sitting there respectfully with his hands in his lap, it caused her teakettle of a temper to hit the boiling point. She walked quickly to the table and set her plate down hard. Some of her scrambled eggs toppled off the plate.

“What are you waiting for?! You wanna say grace with us?! Didn’t you say you don’t believe in God anymore?!”

“Mother,” his grandfather said calmly, but he didn’t look away from his paper. He just turned a page.

“No, Pastor! No! I have held my peace long enough! If you won’t say something, I must! It’s Resurrection Day, and we’re sitting here breaking bread with a heathen!”

Keenan watched the fury mount in his grandmother’s eyes, and he hoped the dramatic rise and fall of her ample bosom wasn’t a precursor to a heart attack. He took no pleasure in her pain, but he needed this reaction from her.

“Grandma, you always taught me to follow my heart,” Keenan said calmly.

“We raised you to love God! You go off, get educated, move across the country and come back an atheist! I don’t even know who you are, Keenan Donovan Marshall!”

“You act like I’m not a good person anymore, Grandma.”

“A good person,” his grandmother said incredulously. “What does good have to do with anything? This isn’t about whether you’re a good person or not! It’s about where you’re going to spend Eternity, boy!”

Keenan looked at his grandfather and said, “Do you want to chime in here, Pastor?”

“Nope,” his grandfather said and continued to read his paper.

Keenan jumped when his grandmother slammed her fist down on the table. “I want you to say something to him, James Patrick Marshall!”

Keenan had his grandparents right where he needed them. His grandmother was using full names all around, and that meant his grandfather had to engage.

The old man put down his paper and looked at his wife. He said calmly, “Mother, this boy is no atheist.”

“I beg your pardon?!” Keenan’s grandmother was staring intensely at her husband.

As calm as always, the old man said, “He’s just making a point.”

“What point?!” Keenan’s grandmother turned her penetrating glare on him.

“Mother?” At the sound of the old man’s calm voice, Keenan’s grandmother turned her attention back to her husband.

“What, Pastor?” The annoyance was clear in her tone.

“Is there anything this boy can tell you that would be worse than him saying he’s an atheist?”

Keenan silently thanked the old man for always knowing exactly how to take a conversation where it needed to go. He looked at his grandmother as she gawked at her husband. Her mouth opened and closed a few times, and it seemed like an eternity before she spoke.

“There’s absolutely nothing he could tell me that I would find worse than him saying he doesn’t believe in God.” She turned her tear-filled eyes on Keenan. “Son... I can accept anything else you tell me, My God! Anything! I just cannot accept that you’re an atheist.”

“I’m not, Grandma,” Keenan said. “I got married six months ago.”

Only the humming of the refrigerator could be heard for several moments.

“Well, who is she?” Keenan saw his grandmother's face start to relax, and he almost didn't want to tell her the rest.

“His name is Conrad Jackson Covington. He goes by Connie. He's staying at a nearby hotel, and he's going to meet us at the church for Easter Sunday service.”

Keenan watched his speechless grandmother's expression change again. As Keenan started reaching for her hand, his grandfather called his name. Keenan looked at the old man, aware that his grandmother was still staring at him.

“Go get ready for church, son,” Keenan's grandfather said.

As Keenan stepped out of the kitchen, he heard the pastor say, “Mother, I believe I'll have some toast this morning.”

Huntress  
By William Hope  
Haymarket, VA

“Should we find shelter?” her companion asked.

She didn't answer. Dark clouds that were building on the horizon mirrored the darkness of her mood. Her apprentice was oblivious to the connection. The animal she rode was not. Its ears twitched and was growing harder to control mentally. She'll have to dismount soon anyway. The coming combat could not be done abreast the creature.

“Well?”

“Shelter would be of little use.” she replied. “It's not a storm that is coming. It is our prey. It is done running.”

“How can you tell?”

“Can you feel the power?” The apprentice nodded.

“Yet there is no lighting. It is saving it for us. Let us prepare.” she said and then gracefully slid to the ground. She then broke the connection with the creature and let it go. Her apprentice did the same. They would have to find their mounts after the coming battle.

She watched him salt a circle, but paid more attention to him than what he was doing. He was young, just over twenty summers, and powerful. If he exercised more control during their sparring, he could easily beat her. So far he had lost each time. She wished she was young enough to propose a partnership. Alas, she was an additional twenty summers, so that opportunity had passed long ago. She felt a stroke of anger at that thought and her mood darkened even further. The advancing clouds appeared to respond in kind. She should feel lucky to be alive. Most daemon hunters failed to reach her age. Burned out by careless use of power or defeated by their prey. Her own master was the only hunter older than herself and he was ancient when she sought to be his apprentice. He would probably outlive Death itself. Still, her's had been a lonely life. She lied to herself into believing it was what she wanted.

She sighed heavily as she started salting her circle. The ground on which they stood was far from ideal for setting a circle. It would have to do. She watched her apprentice as he laced his circle with sulfur to compensate for the poor soil. She nodded with approval and did the same. The approaching clouds had slowed, as if the daemon was not sure how to proceed. A steady breeze blew away from center of the clouds. It was growing colder. Much colder. The building storm was absorbing more energy than a natural one. The coming battle was going to be difficult and the outcome was far from certain.

Her mind wandered again. This time back to the orphanage. A dark and dreadful place where those that weren't scared when they went in were certainly scared if they came out. She supposed that she was luckier than most. Her natural mental skills allowed her to deflect the attention of the weaker minds and warned her of the approach of stronger ones. What haunted her dreams were the cries of those who took her place.

She was startled out of her reflection by the sudden appearance of a dark blue hemisphere over her apprentice's circle of salt and sulfur. She muttered a curse at herself. Losing focus now was a sure way to bring an end to her miseries. She wasn't the type to give up. She set her circle, a brilliant red. Daemons saw things differently and couldn't see colors. They could see other things that normal folk could not. Such as defects in a hunter's circle. One of the many reasons that hunters died young.

The storm had resumed its advance and the leading edge was close enough that the assault would begin at any

moment. Better than waiting any longer. The first bolt was strong for coming from the cloud's edge, and struck her apprentice's circle. The circle popped like a bubble in wine and her apprentice collapsed. Swearing an oath to a number of gods, she struck her circle. She had a few moments before the storm could produce another bolt from the edge. She hurried to her apprentice and dragged him back into her circle. There wasn't any time to see if he was alive as she set about repairing the damage to her circle. The salt line was ragged. Too risky to just re-salt it. She quickly brushed away the damaged section and re-drew the missing part of the salt line. The sulfur would have to be redone completely as it was consumed when the circle broke. She looked up at the storm as she pulled out her bag of sulfur and saw a pair of lightning balls come from deeper within the storm. The daemon must be feeling lucky, for it was too soon to be desperate. Lightning balls rarely hit their intended target and unless there was no protection, they never did much damage. One bounced high overhead and the other passed more than a stone's throw to the left.

She was finishing up lacing her circle with sulfur when she felt the charge build up for the next bolt. It was going to be close. There was no rushing a circle. Too easy to make a mistake and have a defect. Then you might as well have not gone through the effort to make one. She stood moved away from the edge. Physical contact with a circle caused its collapse and was quite painful. She set the circle as the lightning started to appear from the cloud. The bolt struck, the circle held. She quickly gathered energy off the circle before it dissipated. Having the daemon provide some of the energy that would be used to defeat them was a skill few hunters were able to master. Another cause for a hunter's early demise. She took some of the gathered energy and reinforced her circle.

Thus started the initial phase of the battle. As the daemon continued to expend energy against her circle, the clouds contracted and the daemon at its center needed to approach to keep up an attack. She wondered again why daemons didn't conserve their energy and move close enough to start the next phase. It would make her job much more difficult to survive. She supposed that she should be grateful that daemons were creatures of instinct and not much on thought.

She took a moment to check on her apprentice. He was still breathing. She spoke his name and he stirred. That was a good sign. He might be able to contribute to the battle before its end. Until then, she was going to be limited in her options and certainly would not be able to move from the current position.

Time had passed. How much, she didn't know. It had been close to nightfall when the battle was joined and clouds obscured the moons. The daemon continued to strike her circle with lightning. She had pooled as much energy as she dared. Too much and she would have a hard time dissipating the remainder, not enough and she would not survive the fight. Everything in life was a balance.

The lightning strikes ended. The daemon must be close now. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness as she scanned the horizon. Once. Twice. On the third turn she saw a faint glow just over a nearby rise in the plain. She stopped and waited as the daemon came into view several stone throws away. At last. She broke her circle to prepare for the next phase of battle. She cast a spell of illumination over the daemon and caught her breath. The daemon looked like her.

A doppelgänger. Again she cursed the gods. The bounty poster said nothing about a doppelgänger. Could have been a honest mistake. Probably was not. Doppelgängers were very difficult to defeat. Most hunters refused to take the risk. She wished that she had collected more energy from the storm. Wished that her partner was not lying on the ground, useless. Wished that she had paid closer attention to how the storm changed with her mood and how the daemon had quit running after only a few days. Classic doppelgänger signs and she missed them. A mistake that could cost her life as well as that of her apprentice. All because she was more focused on her internal daemons and not the one she was hunting.

A doppelgänger was a master at illusion. Illusions that could do serious damage. She quickly primed a number of healing spells. She did not have time to cast a ward of protection. If her apprentice was conscious, he could have cast one for the both of them. Without one, their survival was in doubt, if not entirely lost.



The daemon cast the first spell to summon a large creature, she countered with a winged horse. Both vanished as they destroyed each other. Another unknown creature appeared and she again brought forth a winged horse. This time only the creature remained. She quickly summoned a knight and augmented its defenses with a small enchantment. The knight quickly dispatched the creature and pressed an attack against her opponent as the battle began in earnest.

The waning moon was high in the sky as the huntress attempted to draw again on her dwindling pool of energy. It was empty. She suspected that the daemon was also near the end of its supply. The skeleton that had dispatched her last creature, died, was resurrected and began covering the final distance between itself and the huntress. She drew her sword and wondered if she had the strength to wield it for any length of time. She used the last of the healing spells to mend some of the deeper wounds.

Her strength faded quickly as the skeleton died many times, only to rise up again to attack. Apparently the daemon still had energy to draw from. She found the skeleton was very good at slipping through her guard. It managed one last time as she killed it again. Falling to the ground she lay there, alive, too weak to rise. The skeleton failed to return. No matter, the daemon would finish her off. It struck her as amusing to her to see her mirror image come to a stop at her feet. She tried to laugh through the pain, closed her eyes and waited as it lifted its sword for the final blow. There would be no words from the daemon. After a few too many heartbeats, her eyes sprung open at the sound of a terrible screech. A sword point jutted from the center of the daemon's chest as it began to fall to one side. Behind it was her apprentice. He pulled the sword from the daemon and tossed it away. The sword, now tainted, would disintegrate at first light.

Her apprentice had cast several spells to heal most of the wounds. The rest would take care of themselves. He put more wood on the fire, cast a ward to keep wandering beasts away and settled down on his bedroll beside hers. After drinking another mouthful of water she spoke.

“Thank you.”

“You are welcome. I could not let my master die, I still have much to learn.”

“Not as much as you believe. And there are others who could teach you.”

“I only want to learn from the best. Besides, I have grown accustomed to your moodiness and I do not want to get used to another.”

“Thank you, again.” She paused a moment before continuing. “Tell me, how did you know it was the doppelgänger standing over me instead of me over it?”

“That was easy. It only looked like you on the outside. Its beauty was only skin deep.”

Closing her eyes again she smiled. Maybe she was not too old for a partnership.



Semper Explorans  
By Peregrine North  
Leesburg, VA

Thomas stepped out onto the upper deck. It was the start of his shift, and it was going to be a long one; he'd told the first mate he'd stay an extra hour so the latter could catch up on a bit of sleep, as the unfortunate fellow had worked the length of an extra shift the previous night rearranging an errant sail.

Thomas didn't mind. It was precisely this moment that had drawn him to the sea in the first place, that moment a dozen years ago as a diminutive deck hand when his uncle had allowed him to come on his first sail. He remembered coming up on deck at that same moment of the night, the masts of the merchant ship rising like giants above his head, the sails, so large to a child's eyes, outlined sharply in white against the deep indigo sky speckled with a thousand glittering stars. It was a long time ago, and since then he had left behind the merchant ships of his youth and joined the Royal Navy, but that was a moment he carried with him, and he remembered it every time he climbed the ladder and stepped up on deck to begin a night shift.

The stars were the same now, of course, as they had been then. He remembered that night long ago as being in early summer, and it was May now, the time when Orion was sinking and Sagittarius rising with the scorpion he forever chased across the sky. It was about three hours after sunset, and the evening was warm and peaceful, perhaps a little on the humid side; after all, they were just off the coast of Bermuda, about twenty miles out, having recently completed a tour of the British forts that lay scattered throughout the islands of the Caribbean. They had brought the forts supplies and new companies of soldiers from England, and taken aboard all those whose term was up and were slated to return.

It was every sailor's dream to go the Caribbean. Thomas had lost count of how many times he had visited on board some Navy vessel, and he generally spent more time on the ocean or docked at St. Kitts and Nevis or Grenada than he did at home, so it could no longer be termed an adventure for him. It was pleasant to remember when it was.

Still, whether you were a young British garrison officer on his first assignment to a Caribbean fort or a seasoned Naval navigator, you were going to run into the same problem at some point: a good cup of English tea was hopelessly hard to find here. Thomas had learned to live without it, or at least with an inferior version of it, but even he missed it sometimes. Home was still home, even if you spent the greater part of your time away from it, and it seemed to Thomas that no matter how many adventures the traveler might see, home was the more abiding thing. It did not escape his notice during their various stops and the exchanges of soldiers that occurred that the ones coming on board were just as jolly as those getting off.

He always carried with him a leather-bound notebook with the words *Semper Explorans*, Latin for "Always Exploring", emblazoned on the front cover, a gift from a childhood friend back home when he had joined the Navy. The friend had written on the inside, "Always keep that spirit. And come visit Newcastle now and again." Thomas always felt a faint glimmer of sadness when he read those words, though he loved his life on the sea. In just a few words, his friend had summed up the seafarer's dilemma, the chronic melancholy found in the poems and songs of sailors whose love for the sea took them ever away from home, but in whose hearts home ever lingered on.

The seaman who was ending his shift went sleepily down into the lower levels of the ship, and Thomas was left alone above-deck. He went to starboard bow and looked up, placing his hands on the familiar old wood of the ship's railing. The stars looked back down. The compasses and navigation systems were getting more and more sophisticated these days, but he still preferred the old fashioned way. He knew the paths of the stars by heart; he could tell you anything about the way they moved

at any season, at any point on the known earth. He was the best the Navy had, which is why he was always on the transatlantic voyages that required an expert head for navigation.

He continued to gaze upwards. The ship was heading northeast by east, 55 degrees according to the compass, although he needed no instrument to obtain that information. The inaccuracy of their position irritated him. They should be 51 exactly. He knew he had given the helmsmen the correct direction, and they had never failed to direct the ship correctly, so this occurrence was quite unusual. It was not an emergency at the moment, but it did mean that they would eventually end up in Lisbon rather than Liverpool by way of the Irish Sea, so he needed to redo the calculations based on their current position.

A glance at Polaris was enough for him to reassess their latitude. Longitude was a bit trickier, and he looked hard at the waning gibbous moon as he considered their east-west position. This was usually done based on the length of time they had been sailing and their speed, but everyone on the high seas knew that dead reckoning was dangerously inaccurate and he had been trying some new methods that used the angle of the moon, and with excellent results thus far.

He nodded as the proper longitude reading appeared in his head. He pulled out the leather-bound journal and a pencil and jotted down the new numbers. A few mental calculations and he had deduced the proper direction. Northeast, 49 degrees. He ripped out the page and turned towards the hatch where he could pop his head down and give the information to the helmsmen.

As he began to walk towards the center of the ship he idly pulled the compass out of his pocket and glanced at it. He halted. His brow furrowed. The compass read their direction as...south? He looked up again. Northeast by east, 55 degrees. He looked at his compass again. South-southeast, 157.5 degrees. He turned. The needle of the compass held at north. It did not appear to be broken. He looked at the stars. Northeast by east. They certainly weren't broken.

He glanced around the sky, then around the ship, less alarmed than bewildered. Everything looked normal. Everything was as it should be. Everything was at peace. The night was perfectly quiet, the wind was not too strong, just enough for a good speed, and the ship made little noise as it cut gently through the placid water. It was a fine night for sailing, really. What was wrong? Maybe nothing. Maybe his compass was broken, and he laughed at himself, albeit a little nervously, as he realized that a simple tool failure was probably the answer. Nonetheless, he had to stop himself from breaking into a run as he went down the hatch to the navigation room and rushed past the quizzical helmsman to the large compass that was positioned near the steering wheel. Thomas looked at it rather timidly.

South-southeast, 157.5 degrees.

He blazed out as rapidly as he had come in. The helmsman watched him wonderingly, then turned back to the compass. His eyes widened when he saw what it read.

Thomas ran to his cabin, sifting through the thousands of notes in his head, the star maps that he had memorized, the variations, the tiny margins of error that could occur. Nothing could even begin to explain why they looked like they were heading north but according to the compass they were heading south. He entered the tiny cell and pulled out a stack of star charts and almanacs that were piled under his desk. They were covered in dust, untouched for he did not know how many months or years, as he never needed to look at them. He fisted through the pages, the old paper cracking and complaining at being woken from its long slumber, the clouds of dust leaping up into the air as he checked the charts against those filed away in his mind. Everything matched. He had made no error.

He went back above-deck and looked pleadingly at the stars, wondering what he could possibly have miscalculated. He turned south, or what he thought was south, towards Sagittarius, and followed the arrow of

the archer towards Antares, the red eye of his enemy, Scorpio. He squinted. Antares was usually red, but it wasn't tonight. It was a bright, pale blue, like Deneb in Cygnus or Vega in Lyra. And the claws of the monster were different. They had turned towards the archer, as though the scorpion was facing him. He looked back at Sagittarius. The archer was shining brightly, more brightly than before. Thomas had always fancied that the stars were brighter here than elsewhere, more glittering and diamondlike, but this was something else. Something was happening. Thomas looked out across the sea. It was calm as a mirror and radiant with the brilliance of the strangely shining stars, the constellations that had moved for the first time in all the time that humans had studied stars.

Thomas had no idea what to do. Neither his childhood on the merchant ships nor his Navy training nor his years of star knowledge had prepared him for this. Who should he believe, the stars or the compass? He smiled slightly, a flicker of adventure lighting up his face. He knew the answer. He did not know where they were taking him, but he always trusted the stars.



Ships  
By Tom Finn  
Reston, VA

Bridget knew she was holding a summons to help her mother die.

Someone else reading the telegram wouldn't have had a clue. "You'll be needing to come home now" didn't exactly scream, "Get back here before your mother dies." But the message couldn't have been any clearer to a Driscoll. "Cows don't milk themselves," lobbed across the room while you focused on a morning biscuit, could rival a drill sergeant's bark to those accustomed to its bite, but might have seemed an observation about bovine limitations to an Italian visitor. "God bless all here" at holiday meant, "I love you all so dearly I could embrace you," whereas the Italian visitor might have embraced you but surely would have missed that God's blessing was an Irishman's love gusher.

Driscoll communication. Understated, understood, with a storm-whipped undertow.

The undertow of this message was no less powerful than that sea. There was enough back rush in it that she knew it would carry her back across a whole ocean to tend to her sick mother. And though Bridget felt she had no choice, she bristled at the thought that the sender, her Aunt Rite, was giving her no choice.

And wasn't that what had gotten her here to Jersey City, NJ, in the first place? Four brothers who escaped dish washing, floor washing, sock mending, and table clearing. Not so subtle steering away from education and toward finding a boy. They knew not to try to push a nun's life on her, but that didn't spare her the strange expectation of finding a boy but not doing anything that might occupy a boy and a girl while they tried finding each other.

Never mind that the boy crop of Ballydehob, Ireland wouldn't have been a harvest worth cultivating. Freckle-faced, sights set within a ten-mile radius, and prospects that included a lifetime of fishing or cattle didn't exactly set a girl's hair on fire.

Perhaps this Bridget lens on the world was why her parents never understood why she wanted to come to America. They weren't rich, but the family had each other, food on the table, an occasional dance, and the sea. Why was the girl always unsatisfied?

"Cousin Minnie did it!" She would insist.

To this there was always a ready retort. "And you see what that's gotten her, don't ya? A husband seven years dead, 4 kids, and a life of toil in a strange country. Is that what you are pining for, Miss Bridget?"

These would be her mother's words. Her Da wouldn't brook an argument with her. He'd manage a Mona Lisa smile when his daughter finished her rant and find some tea or a chore that needed done. This technique was much more effective than the motherly Minnie massacre. She was the only daughter, he was her Da, and though it was true what they said that she had him at her sweet smile mercy since her third day of existence, the thought of leaving him was the only real counterweight to the hemming in that an Irish village girl would face from mothers, churches, nosy neighbor women, and people like Aunt Rite who didn't question the assumptions Bridget did. It would never occur to her Aunt that her niece's telegram response might be:

“Sorry, I just took a nasty, seasick, week-long voyage to get here a year ago, and I’m not crossing right back again to the world whose sand I managed to kick from my sandals on a gut-wrenching, rain-filled day. And I’ve got a life here – not a great one, but at least it’s mine. I can’t make it.”

Admittedly, a long telegram, but that was the gist of the annoyance she felt at “you’ll be needing...”

“You’ll be going, won’t you?”

That was Minnie’s hand-on-the shoulder question as she, too, looked down at the telegram. “Won’t you” wasn’t stated like, “Of course you’re going, right?” It was “Won’t you” in the sense of “You’ve decided to go, haven’t you,” though I know you’d really rather not go back on your dream.

Her cousin got it, even though the two were separated by twenty years of age. Mary Driscoll Finn decided that poor village girl married to poor village farmer wasn’t going to be her lot, so she had set sail from Ballydehob nearly thirty years before. But it wasn’t just that Cousin Minnie got it because they shared that sail and that awful uprooting and the high wire act of being an entrepreneur of a total life. Scaling the Cliffs of Moher might have been easier. Indeed the comparison felt true, because both of them came with nothing and were pounding their pylons into a country where signs said, “Irish Need Not Apply” and where they were simply trying to get footing. Both had experience with their kind being seen as second class. But experience didn’t mean it was any easier to fight the dismissals and denied opportunities.

It wasn’t all that, though, that endeared her cousin to Bridget. It was that, even now, in facing a choice that seemed choice-less, Minnie was saying, “What’s your decision, girl? It is yours to make.”

And that made her turn and face her cousin and fall into her arms in tears. Yes, she was going – her mother had summoned her again. It made no difference that the previous calls were to darn a sock, clean up after her brothers, be a good Catholic girl, or muck a stall and that this one was “I need your help, I’m dying.” At some level, they were all the same summons – a dependence in a family full of men that Bridget had tried to shake by going 3000 miles away. Ma had found the only way to get her back.

And as a good Catholic girl, the tears included a substantial dose of thinking, “How can I even think to object – my mother is dying!”

Her cousin absorbed the hug and the tears – for just so long. “I have something you’ll need.” She grabbed her hand and took her over to a little box that she had hidden behind dishes in a cabinet. Willie had made it. It was one of the few things of his she had left. He had given it to her as a gift. It was more like a bond. He’d carved a ship on its top.

“Take this.” Out of the box came enough money for sailing over.

“I can’t. I can’t take this,” Bridget managed through the waterfall cascading down both cheeks.

They both knew the refusal was feeble. Minnie was a combination of formidable and charitable. You can’t break a giver when she wants to give.

That was the sendoff, though there was the matter of when she would go. Minnie had naturally checked that there was a boat the next day, but Bridget wanted to give her work notice. So she left three days later, estimating that her Aunt Rite’s customary over-reactivity should give her about a month’s worth of grace period.

The sail back home gave her a good seven days for the mental battle of guilt versus self-definition. Primarily female, Catholic voices took up arms in her brain to accuse her of wretched self-centeredness while, “Jaysus, her very mother lay on her death bed!” How could she even think of her clean break a year ago and her dreamy life plans?



Bridget was not unequipped for this battle. She'd passed on the wife-life Ballydehob had prepared for her. She had held her own against four brothers, and she had figured out long ago that she wasn't going to be sucker punched by the suffering martyr complex that created those voices in the women in her family and in the town.

What she needed was to be a biddy. True biddies have an edge. They take no guff. Ironically, the nickname for Bridget is "Biddy," but she wasn't old enough at 27 to grow into full-fledged biddiness. She clearly had potential. Minnie had it, and she was only 47. Her advice about the voices might have been something along the lines of, "To hell with them."

Bridget's internal back and forth was accompanied by a surprisingly smooth sail. Calm waters, sunny skies, temperate March weather – surely this was a reverse of the curse Bridget just knew her mother had ordered up when she left Ireland. That sail included constant chop, numerous storms, 4 upchucks, a fever, and 3-4 annoying, unshaven men whose sidling up she, upon reflection, had wished had occurred during the upchucks. Now, returning home to her mother, well, that was what she should have been doing in the first place, and God graciously bowed and lent a soft, prevailing wind toward Queenstown.

There she was eight days later with a suitcase in hand, cap and scarf, looking up a small rise at the homestead, such as it was. Strangely, her irritation was gone. Shoots were showing, the broom leaned, the door still lacked paint, fences bowed. It was a brief dither that coaxed something short of a grin. She opened the door.

Assumptions are a wonder. Formed but known only to some internal fairy, garden bulbs that spring up and you say, "Oh, yes, I planted those." At the door swing, seated heads swiveled but the bodies remained motionless. (Ah, the assumption was they would spring to their feet just like those bulbs.) Mouths remained closed, tight. (Ah, the assumption was they would open as petals to the sunshine now gracing their door.) Lips then pursed, moving to an extended, straight line (Ah, the assumption was teeth would sparkle.) Heads turned, all toward her Da, as if to say, "Over to you."

And indeed, her Da at long last (5 seconds of eternity it was), got up, gazed at his daughter with "the smile," and hugged her. (And the assumption here now surfaced – that the smile would be joyous and broad, and the hug uplifting. This hug shook).

Bridget pulled back. Her father's eyes glistened. She looked around the room. Her Aunt Rite, two of her brothers, Joe and Gene, and bubbly Mrs. O'Mahony, were all staring at her, not a word yet spoken. That was Driscoll communication. Her mother was gone.

She remembered stamping her feet. First one. Then again. And then a pattering of both, with fists clenched. And finally screaming, "NO!" That was all she managed before her father gathered her up, and the assembled enveloped them both. The grief scene proceeded as one would expect, eventually moving to the hows and how coulds of all of it, but the pounding question in her head preceded all of that.

"Da, when?"

"Two days ago, love. She knew you were on your way."

That was the information that she assumed with horror would color the rest of her life. Bridget had done, ironically, what her mother would have counseled: "Think of others." Her boss, shockingly, had been sympathetic enough to say, "You'll have a job when you get back." She had waited three days.

So she was now caught in a tangle of recrimination about which none of these people would ever hear but that would drown out the tale of the run-up to death, the stories of all those who said a kind word, who visited, who brought the Lord's blessings. How, in the midst of doing good, could she be left with an eternal "if only?"

The days came and went, the usuals of Irish funeral preparations, wakes, and burials, the kind comments about her Ma and, sure, what a fine daughter she had conceived. The familiarity of it all was comforting – her family, the townspeople, the turns of phrase, the accent (!), the routines, the food. She was also drawn to anything that exuded “country.” There were jobs (such as they were) in Jersey City, but not a lot of woods, trees, and country paths. These paths offered quiet. She was stunned at how much she noticed the quiet. It was balm to her ears. She hadn’t realized the assault that trolleys, cars, fruit vendors, crowds, and trains had made on those ears.

And so it was that returning from one of her walks into that quiet she happened upon her father, mending a fence. He was good at mending fences – stone ones, wooden ones, wire ones. He’d curse the cow that knocked the thing down, but he was a great fixer. He was in the midst of another remedy when she happened upon him.

“American lass!” was his greeting. “On an Irish farm. Are you lost?”

Bridget smiled. “This place feeds my soul, Da.”

Laying down the saw, he turned. “But not your mind, eh? Or your stomach? Or your dreams?”

That caught her off guard. She looked at him squarely and, after a few moments, sighed. “No, Daddy, those things it doesn’t feed.”

“And one out of four won’t keep you here, now, will it?”

She looked away. So this was the unavoidable leave-taking talk, next to a broken fence.

“Bridge, I’ve got something to tell you.”

“You know your mother’s little box? Hidden, but we all knew where it was. She knew she couldn’t keep you from going back. So she had been putting away money for months. Your Aunt Rite and Mrs. O’Mahony were on board. Your brothers contributed.”

“You are the life of this family, honey. It will rip all of our hearts out, again, that you will be leaving us. But none of us want to rip the life out of you. So we are buying your trip back to your new country.”

This was a jolt from the grave. Her mother was dead! But that mother, contrary to all Bridget’s mind-wanderings, had wanted her daughter to have her wish. And her biddy-buddies, and her sons, and her husband – all were supporting her goal, despite their own preferences.

“Daddy. Daddy, I didn’t know! I didn’t know.” She was bursting, and the bursts were joy, regret, guilt-ridden gratitude.

Her father took her hands, looked down, and, damn it, gave her the smile.

“Well, if we’d told you, then that would have ruined everything, wouldn’t it? Is that what they do in America? Looking for praise and thanks, are they?”

“There’s one more thing, Bridge. The ship you’ll go back on.”

“The ship? Who cares about the ship?”

“We’re thinking you will, love. The whole of Ireland’s been talking about it, being built in Belfast as it was. It sails April 10. I’ll take you over there meself. Your brothers want to come as well.”

“Da, the ship was no wonder of the seas. In fact, the experience was forgettable. I’m just thanking the stars for all of you. I never expected to get your blessing for my new life. I feel like a sack of potatoes is off my shoulders. I don’t care about the ship.”

“I have a feeling this experience won’t be forgettable, Bridge. You’re sailing on the Titanic.”



Small Game  
By Janet Holmaas Hicks  
Sterling, VA

Lorene figured Myra Clew was as easy a housemate as she had ever known. The old woman had never pried into her past, nor asked about her reputation. But Myra's incessant singing and chattering drove Lorene from inside the cabin at least once each day. As Myra prattled on about Mr Thierry this or Mr Thierry that, Lorene would soon find it necessary to put down the dishrag or cup or water bucket she was holding and say, "I'm going out to hoe the garden," or "I'll tend the pony," or "I'm going hunting."

"Why, you weren't nothing but a scared little calf when Mr Thierry brought you here." Myra Clew's eyes crinkled into a smile. Too soon, that smile turned down into a frown. "But, don't you dare leave me alone, girl."

"I said, I'm going hunting." Lorene tore her eyes away from the old woman's face, to gaze at the Winchester rifle propped upright beside the door. "Suppose that gun is loaded?"

"Of course it is. Ain't it always? Ain't it just as Mr Thierry suggests we do: leave that gun right by the door, fully-loaded? In case some small game appears in the cabin yard, making free with itself for our supper, we can shoot it. Or in case some miscreant crosses our threshold uninvited; we got the means to protect ourselves, whichever." Myra barely took time to suck in a breath. "Best you don't go out there, at all. We should just wait for Mr Thierry to come by. He can do all the hunting for us."

"But, Myra! We need meat for stew. That man ain't been up here in more than a week. "

"T'ain't safe! After you traipse out to feed the pony, maybe you could hoe up more carrots. But you come back here quick. Being out there ain't safe." Myra punctuated her words with a trail of gravy sploshed into the air as she waved her ladle in Lorene's direction.

Lorene didn't speak. She just shook her head and nodded in reply to the rest of Myra's questions.

"If you go out there now, you won't stray far? And, you'll be careful? Promise me. Mr Thierry don't want you talking to any of them cowboys. He claims them sly fellows will tell you most anything to get the better of you. The last one that come up here, I drove off with a switch." Myra made an exaggerated show of switching, before turning back around to her stew pot. She lowered her voice to a whisper and rapped her ladle against the kettle in a raucous clang. "Now you go out there. Do that hunting for us. I know you'll find what's best for stew, sweetie."

Without a word, Lorene reached for her hat and shrugged into her duster. She gathered up the Winchester and stepped out onto the porch, knowing full well that Myra's tuneless singing would start up again, too soon.

West of the cabin, Lorene had a favorite perch, a wide flat-topped boulder that protruded out from the hillside. From it, she could see both the uphill prairie slope and the long flat expanse of grass leading to the river. She settled on the boulder, lay the Winchester close beside her hand, and scoured the vicinity with her eyes, searching for small game: something wild.

Out here, she was free of Myra's prattle. All she could hear was wind through grass, birdsong and the distant hiss from the Chicory River. Tansy might kite down from above, stalk around on a patch of nearby gravel and stop to preen his feathers. The hawk usually lifted off after discovering Lorene had no food to share.

Sometimes cattle grazed along the river. Shooting at them would be a terrible risk. Ranchers frowned on poaching and their cowboys often appeared with the drifting cattle. The men usually worked in pairs, though a lone rider might bypass the herd to ride along the water's edge. With Mr Thierry's words in her mind, whenever Lorene saw cowboys, she would will herself into stillness, hiding in plain sight like a hare in prairie grass.

Today, Tansy did not appear. Lorene missed the companionable quirks of the hawk's head, his ruthless yellow eyes. Alone, she sat motionless on her boulder and focused on a little puff of dust growing in the distance. It had to be some critter approaching from downstream. Lorene sucked in her breath and prayed. Maybe this time, she'd get a chance at something other than small game. But a stray cow appeared beneath the dust cloud. A just-born calf wobbled behind on new legs. The cow walked forward, began to graze, then stopped and looked back, as if uncertain its child followed.

Lorene lifted the Winchester, aimed at the calf, then put her rifle down again. Poignancy pricked at her heart. *Once, I had a child.* A scent of prairie air brought the memory of his dimpled face, his tug on her teet. *You were too small to wobble after me before the good lord tore you away!* She rocked forward, remembering her child and the husband who'd turned his back to her loss. An attempt to resist tears and sorrow left her choked with rage.

She willed herself to think about anything else. From deep within, she conjured a more recent image: *Mr Thierry!* Sorrow in her throat dissolved. A different heat replaced it. She imagined their chance meeting outside her vacant, ruined homestead, blades of sunlight highlighting Mr Thierry's hair, lightning mirrored in his eyes and, as his buckskin cow pony shoved him forward from behind, Mr Thierry's inadvertent, trickster grin. Lorene took a deep breath. And, got angry. Hadn't he promised to find her husband? He'd schooled her to use a rifle, and pointed her toward Myra Clew's, but now, Mr Thierry had abandoned her, too. Lorene's fingers caressed the rifle stock. *How many days gone, a week? Two? He took away my horse and left me. Where is that man?*

Something cast a stillness over the prairie. Birdsong silenced, the hum of insects dissipated, only the persistent rustle of wind through grass and the distant rush of water remained. Lorene glanced once over her shoulder. She expected to see Tansy plummeting from the sky. Instead, as she resisted a gasp, she twisted around and raised her rifle to meet the eyes of a watcher.

A stranger in rough attire crouched uphill on the slope behind her. He was close enough for words, a bit too far for a knife throw. Her bullet might reach him easily.

The man offered a nervous shrug as he stared down at her along the barrel of her rifle. "Trust me, ma'am. Please. I ain't armed."

Lorene allowed her gaze to drift away from the stranger's heathen-dark skin, his black, incongruously wavy hair, his ghost of a mustache. He looked, not so much different from that long-ago husband of hers. She studied the man's clothing: scuffed boots, canvas trousers and a ticking-striped shirt beneath a fringed jacket. She could see no holster, no pistol grip protruding from his waist.

"I'm to trust, ain't something tucked behind your back?" She asked. "Tell me, honestly."

Light seemed to glitter around him. He smiled, not breaking eye contact. "Ain't nothing behind me. Reckon I don't carry much but my lariat." The man lifted his chin, bobbing his head backwards to indicate up slope. "Rope is on my horse, yonder."

Lorene focused on his barely-shaven cheeks and chin. "Who are you? Why are you prying around here?" She didn't lower the Winchester, but the man seemed less fazed at having her rifle pointed at him.

"Name's Lassen, ma'am," he said. "Shem asked me to bring your mare back. Left her in the corral with Myra's pinto. She's some nice little critter." Beginning where his neckerchief touched his throat, color crept up onto Lassen's cheeks. "Your palouse, I mean, not Crazy Myra or her scrawny pony. Suppose that bird of yours can spy that mare of yours out in the corral, easy enough."

"You know Tansy?" Lorene asked.

"Seen the hawk, once or twice," Lassen smiled.

The tip of Lorene's rifle wavered as she stared him. "That all you came to tell me?" she asked. "Who is Shem?"

Lassen paused a moment before answering. "Shemal Thierry. Didn't he say to expect me? I come up here to check on Miss Myra sometimes."

Lorene narrowed her eyes. "Why didn't Mr Thierry bring my mare back, himself? He's the one, stole her."

"Took her to get her shoes fixed, you mean. Ranch owner sent him on some errand. Suppose Thierry's been gone a week. He might be back in month." The man twisted in his crouched position. He nodded to Lorene. "All the same with you, ma'am, I'm going to stand up. I aim to chop firewood for Miss Myra, in exchange from some of that famous stew of hers."

Lassen stood, proving to be a bit taller than she expected. Once uncoiled, the man turned and walked away. Just as Lorene spied light flashing off a revolver tucked into the back waistband of Lassen's trousers, Tansy's wing eclipsed the sun.

"Myra's stew needs more than small game," Lorene whispered to Shemal Thierry, his trickster smile superimposing itself on Lassen's back.

She lifted her rifle.





The End of the World  
By Debora Ewing  
Annandale, VA

Our children have left us for the cities.

We Nenets have migrated across Yamal Peninsula for generations. We take care not to disturb the beings that live around us.

Yamal, in the language of city people, means End of the World. All the way to Kara Sea there are low shrubs and wind-stripped birches. There are bogs, lichen, howling winds, reindeer, and us. We move north in summer so our reindeer can graze on fresh pastures. We return south when the Ob River freezes over.

I have given birth to three sons; one died an infant and two went to the city.

Once they were no longer afraid of the Communists, our children gave up herding reindeer for what they called civilization. They went to universities to learn other words than those we taught them. They speak Russian and no longer regard the spirits. My sons think I am simple because I follow reindeer with my sledge. I know other words, city words. I have no use for them.

Cities have terrible stories. Our Nenets children are bewitched by bright lights, foreigners, and alcohol. They leave us and live among people who know nothing of reindeer. They get lost without the cycles and rhythms of the tundra. Our children become unstable, depressed and ashamed to return as Nenets.

One of my sons came back to Yamal for a season, and returned to the city. The youngest I never saw again.

Land is everything to us. The land belongs to our reindeer. We all belong to the earth.

The reindeer give us everything: their skins cover the *choom* where we sleep; their tendons make ropes; we carve tools and build sledge parts from their bones. Each Nenets is dedicated a sacred reindeer which must roam free until the end of its days, unfettered, not sacrificed for its flesh. This is our tradition. Our children don't recognize their reindeer anymore.

Nenets children who come back from the city tell us to farm the reindeer, and sell the meat and hides. They don't remember the Communist Sovkhoz collective farms. The Yamal Nenets kept our reindeer and sledges in those days.

Oil Company men come to us and explain how valuable the oil is that flows under our land. They tell us no less than thirty countries will buy oil from them. Most of the oil will be used as gasoline for cars and fuel for the jets we see in the sky. The thirty countries will respect us, we are told, because we have what they need.

The Oil people say other companies will come like Brigadiers and put up fences to keep us out. They promise to let the reindeer run freely across the Bovanenkovskoye Field. They say they want to protect our heritage and let us migrate the way we always have.

Our children use words like infrastructure, exportation, and valuation. I understand infrastructure to mean the railroad on which our reindeer break their legs. I understand exportation means we will stay in one place, put up fences, and tell the reindeer and spirits where they can walk. Money men will argue the valuation of our nomadic life.

Life is a process, not a thing to be weighed and priced.

Inside my *choom* I lie on a cot made from reindeer skins. Moonlight comes through the tent-flap. I see legs and then a shadow. The ghost of my ancestor appears to me. She holds a baby at her breast, and the baby

cries. My ancestor explains without words that her breast milk has been poisoned. The veins of Mother Earth have been broken and the blood flows where it should not be flowing. The baby wails, and it accuses me with its eyes.

While the baby at her poisoned breast cries, my ancestor points through the open flap of my *choom* to the tundra. I look outside.

Roaming across the tundra I see animals which never existed in my lifetime: enormous hairy beasts with tusks and trunks, one-horned horses, and parrots with fat beaks and green feathers.

My ancestor sits on the floor of the *choom* in front of me and leans close. I can smell her greasy hair, her rotting teeth, her empty flesh. She has nothing left to sustain us. The baby stops wailing. It simply stares with its deep, bitter eyes.

“Soon it will be time to take down the *choom*,” my ancestor warns, “to pack the sledges and bring the reindeer across the Bovanenkovskoye Field. We had better pray that the Oil Company with their jeeps and clipboards haven’t dug trenches and put in great metal pipelines. We had better have a plan if there are men with hard-hats and guns and jackets labeled SECURITY.”

My ancestor rises above the floor, and puts her withered feet down upon it. I hear her skin rattle like paper when she moves. The baby at her poisoned breast heaves a sigh, and its head rolls back like a broken thing when she bends to exit the *choom*.

“Get ready,” she says, as she fades into the herd of reindeer. The reindeer which is mine limps after her. “Sharpen your knife. They will leave you here.” The door-flap falls and all is dark.

The flap of the *choom* opens again, and in comes the head of a man carrying a clipboard.

“Yeah, it’s empty,” he says. “Bunch of blankets and ashes and stuff. Cold in there.”

“There’s probably bones in there.” I hear a second voice outside the *choom*. “Door’s facing the wrong way, away from the sun. It’s a grave tent. They just leave the old people.”

“They do that?”

“That’s what I heard.”

“Wow.” The head and clipboard disappear, and footsteps crunch across the cold grass.

Our migration is more permanent than the countries who will pay for the earth-blood under our land. I try to tell the Oil Company men that all things belong to Mother Earth, and she is withering.

I don’t think they can hear me.

The Sea-King's Widow  
By Valerie Fliss  
Sterling, VA

It was calm and clear the night the people of Arfordir chose to send their Sea-King's body to dance with his ancestors beneath the sea. The moon was full and held its place in the cloudless skies, outshining all the stars; its reflection in the waves wrinkled and winked back at it, because even when there were no winds or storms, the sea along the coast of Arfordir was never calm. The waters violently threw themselves against each other and the rocky coastline, their constant thunder never-ending.

The people of Arfordir lived in fear of the sea; it was their life and their death. The sea gave them the fish they ate and the kelp they burned as fuel for their fires - but in return it took their lives, if they weren't careful. Only the best sailors could go out on the waves and hope to return; Drais, the old Sea-King, was the best sailor in Arfordir, yet even he would find his end beneath the waves. Everyone in Arfordir ended up beneath the waves.

"Our dead dance in the sea," they said when they cast out the funeral boats that carried their loved ones away. "Everyone joins the dance when their day comes!"

And tonight it was Drais' turn - but he was not alone.

Gorryn, his widow, was to join him.

The laws of Arfordir were open-minded when it came to the ownership of property - men and women were both able to own lands and ships, and any title or property owned by a man became his wife's after his death and vice-versa. At least, the law was equal in all things *except* for the throne of Arfordir. The Sea-King was traditionally elected by the lords and nobles of Arfordir, who were permitted to choose amongst the bravest and strongest sailors in the land - it was an honor the lords and nobles did not want to give up. But because it was unlawful to deny the Sea-Queen her right to her husband's property, the lords and nobles came up with this arrangement instead: If the Sea-King died and his Sea-Queen still lived, she was to sail out with his body to the open sea - should the Sea-Queen survive the night and make it back to the shores by morning, she could claim the throne as her own. If not, she belonged to Foroedd, god of the sea and her fate was his to command.

No Sea-Queen had ever made it back.

Gorryn thought about these things as the funeral boat with her husband's body was towed out to the open waters. Spray from the violent waves knocked the little boat and slapped her face; her beautiful mourning robes were soaked through and heavy with saltwater. But the only water on her face was the sea's - Gorryn hadn't shed a single tear after her husband's death. There had been a great deal of crying in the crowd when the Sea-King's funeral boat was pulled out of the harbor - but Drais hadn't been a kind man nor a popular ruler, so Gorryn knew the crying wasn't for him. It was good of the people to feel sorry for her, the pretty young widow sailing out to meet her doom; because of their kindness to her, a stranger in their land, she had never regretted marrying their Sea-King.

"But they think I'm doomed to dance with my husband and his ancestors," she thought.

It was true enough: Gorryn did not know how to sail. She'd never been on a boat before she came to Arfordir to marry Drais. She was born further inland, in the forested realm of Choedwig - there, amongst the trees and groves, they had no need for ships or sailing. Even the river barges were few and far between,

because the river that ran through Choedwig was wide and shallow and its waters flowed with more music than force. It was very different from the waters Gorrbyn found herself on now.

The ships towing Drais and his widow out to sea suddenly stopped and released their lines. They turned away quickly - they did not want to watch the unfortunate Sea-Queen meet her fate at the hands of Foroedd. Gorrbyn didn't blame them; it would be easier to do what she needed to do without an audience.

As the boats sailed back to the lights on the coastline, Gorrbyn pulled a bundle of threads out from under her mourning robes and began to weave.

She had been chosen for Drais because she was the best weaver in Choedwig. In a land of weavers, she was the only one who had mastered weaving spider-silk from the gold-bodied spiders that lived in the deep of the forest. Their fragile, delicate threads would snap at the slightest roughness, but in Gorrbyn's hands the threads spun together and formed a single strand so strong, that nothing could break it. Not even the violent sea could break them - Gorrbyn had woven Drais' fishing nets from her spider-silk and there wasn't the slightest tear in any of them, despite all their use. The only praise she ever heard from Drais was for her nets, the wedding gifts she'd brought him out of her forest.

"I'll bet the sea-god himself has tried to pick them apart and failed!" boasted the Sea-King over the feasts he'd pulled from the waves using those same nets. "But Foroedd is no match for my woman!"

Gorrbyn frowned at the memory. She had meant the fishing nets to be shared amongst his people, but Drais had kept them all to himself, so that he alone benefited from Gorrbyn's skill.

"We will see," she whispered to the spider-silk net in her lap. "We will see..."

And as she knew he would, Foroedd came to her.

Gorrbyn did not see the sea-god when he arrived, nor did she hear him - but she knew when he was there. The air shifted and the waters around Drais' funeral boat stilled, so that Gorrbyn was sitting in a watery valley with raging mountains all around her. However, she didn't stop her work to look for Foroedd - she needed the sea-god to come to *her*.

"Patience, say the spiders," she whispered to herself, remembering what her weaving masters had taught her in the early days. "Patience makes the knots tight and the thread strong!"

"What else do the spiders say?" asked a voice, as if from the deeps below. The voice made Gorrbyn's bones shiver and her stomach curled uncomfortably, but her hands remained steady.

"They also say that all things in this world are connected," she answered calmly. "The threads are invisible, but they are there. And the more threads that connect us, the tighter our fates are intertwined."

There was a rumble of laughter from the waters under the funeral boat and the valley of calm spread out a little further across the sea.

"How many of your threads do you suppose are connected to me, Sea-Queen?" asked Foroedd; his voice was closer now.

"Many, my lord," replied Gorrbyn. "And they've all brought me here, to you."

The answer seemed to please the sea-god, because there was another rumble of laughter.

“Good,” he said. “I am glad you are taking this so well - the other Sea-Queens usually cried and clutched to their dead husbands, as if they could help. Not the old ones...they knew better than to behave like that. But the younger ones, they always cried. Not you, though - the youngest and prettiest of them all, and yet not a single tear. Are you not afraid?”

“Not of you, my lord,” answered Gorrbyn.

Foroedd was pleased further by this reply, and the calm of the ocean spread even further out; for the first time since Gorrbyn arrived in Arfordir, the sound of the waves had all but faded from hearing. She dared to lift her eyes from her work and saw the head of a dark-haired man floating in the water before Drais’ boat. His hair and beard seemed to be the night-filled waters themselves, and his eyes glowed at her like the moon above. Gorrbyn saw herself reflected in his gaze and she looked away again; but it wasn’t quick enough for her not to notice the sea-god’s smile.

“What *are* you afraid of, Sea-Queen?” he asked. “It can’t be your husband anymore...he’s dead and gone now, and you’re safe from him. He was a miserable excuse for a Sea-King; and his death! Oh, choking on wine! A Sea-King who drowned on the land - I should refuse to take his body to his ancestors! They won’t want him!”

Gorrbyn said nothing in reply to this; she continued to weave her threads, which shimmered in the moonlight as though they were tiny moonbeams themselves. Foroedd was quiet for a long while, and Gorrbyn grew worried that he’d lost interest in her. But when she looked up, he was right next to the boat, his moon-gaze fixed on her. The Sea-Queen turned back to her hands almost immediately, but she saw another smile.

“Such beautiful handiwork,” said the sea-god admiringly. “I would recognize it anywhere - do you know how many hours and days I have spent trying to tear your nets apart?”

“Perhaps as many hours and days as I spent making them,” replied Gorrbyn.

“Perhaps,” he agreed. “Was it difficult, leaving your people? They must miss you and your talents.”

“I do miss the forests,” answered the Sea-Queen. “But I am a weaver, and my marriage to Drais was for my people’s good as much as it was for his people’s. I tied our lands and fates closer together, and for that I am glad.”

“What a nice answer,” said Foroedd. “But I can’t imagine that you will like dancing below with your husband’s ancestors. What does the forest do to your dead?”

“It lets us sleep,” answered Gorrbyn, with a smile of remembrance. “We weave shrouds for our loved ones and lay them amongst the trees, so that they may sleep and dream and grow into the forest. That way, they are always with us.”

Foroedd snorted.

“Sounds dull,” he remarked. “What good are the sleeping dead to a forest?”

“What good is a wild, raging dance to a sea?” asked Gorrbyn in reply.

The boat suddenly shuddered and Gorrbyn glanced away from her weaving to see Foroedd had grabbed the side with a large, wet hand. Saltwater pooled around her feet, but the sea-god did not climb into the boat. Yet.

“What good is the dance to the sea?” he repeated; Foroedd's voice had gone as quiet as the waves were calm - Gorryn thought it sounded far more terrible than when he had thundered and boomed.

“What good are waves that reach up to the sky and crash down with all the forces of nature?” continued the sea-god. “What good is that to me? Why, it makes humans afraid - and when they are afraid, they respect and adore me! The people of Arfordir send their dead to dance below the sea for me, and their fear and awe give me power! What greater way to get power than that?”

“Love and gentleness do just the same,” replied Gorryn bravely; her mouth had gone dry with nervousness, but she spoke anyway. “If you love freely and respect others, they will respect and love you in return. What greater power is there than to give away oneself and to receive another's self in return?”

“They don't always love you in return,” said Foroedd, and he flicked water onto Drais' dead face. “Or did you not love this one enough to earn his back?”

“I loved him as best as I could,” she answered truthfully. “I have accompanied him here, haven't I?”

“Yes, you did,” agreed the sea-god. “And now you are at MY mercy. Do you believe the power of love can save you from me?”

“I believe in many things,” said Gorryn. “I believe that a woman can love an unworthy husband. I believe that our fates are tied together in ways beyond our understanding. And I believe that a Sea-Queen can face the might of the sea and return home!”

The sea-god was quiet. A moment later, the boat gave another horrible lurch and Gorryn felt a figure clamber into it. There was a splash and Drais' body disappeared from beside her, while another man took his place - but Gorryn didn't dare look up from her work.

“Are you going to throw me overboard too?” she asked in a voice barely louder than a breath.

Foroedd leaned close to her, so that Gorryn could smell the salt in his hair and on his brow.

“Oh, just a little closer!” she thought, gripping her weaving. “If only he would sit a little closer!”

“Are you frightened of me now?” asked the sea-god in a hoarse whisper.

“No, my lord,” she answered breathlessly. “But, if I am going to die now, I should like to leave this world with a kiss!”

Foroedd laughed.

“I see no harm in that,” he replied.

A hand reached out and tilted Gorryn's chin up, so that she met the sea-god's moon-gaze again. She saw her reflection there in his eyes, determined and resolute - she would not be dancing below the waves! Not tonight, nor ever!

And then, as the dark-haired Foroedd leaned in to kiss her, Gorryn struck. She cast out her net, woven from unbreakable spider-silk out of love for both her peoples, and she wrapped it tightly around the sea-god's heart...

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The next morning - as the people of Arfordir said years and years later - Drais' funeral boat returned from the sea, the Sea-Queen in it unscathed. However, Drais' body was gone and another man was with her instead. The story went that Gorryn claimed the throne of Arfordir and ruled it with the man, whom she made her husband, and soon the people came to love him as much as she did. All the days that she ruled, the seas were calm and the people of Arfordir prospered. When the Sea-Queen died, her widower sailed out with her body and never returned. The sea went back to its wild dance, but the waters were never as rough as before, for the people said the sea-god remembered that love was as powerful as fear and he did not want to wake his wife, who slept and wove her dreams beneath the waves with him.





The Will  
By Christine Rohrhofer  
Leesburg, VA

Grey hair spiraled out from her threadbare, straw hat like a bushy tail. She waited, panted breath, eyes slivers of spyglasses, behind the rusted, red wheelbarrow for the culprit of the crime. The pistol rested its barrel against her sun-worn cheek. She knew he'd come back after she filled the cat's bowls with chopped chow. In the last two days, he'd already run away with two of the newborns. Got to be so regular that the mama cat didn't bring her young ones out of hiding.

Just when she saw the first sight of the burnt umber paws of the killer, Gini pointed the orange-tipped barrel of her bright green super soaker gun and rang out five successive shots of ice-cold water at the red-tailed fox.

Grunting against the barrow, she helped herself up on her dusted boots to run after the slayer. She fired five more shots, but none landed. She yelled toward the slanted screen door, "Bernard, get out here! You're missing all the action."

The fox dashed to the knoll, turned, and waited, knowing that she would lose interest soon. She fired off two more rounds. None even grazed the fur. Holding herself up bent over with hands heavy on her knees, she laughed through wheezes of air.

Opening the rickety, wooden screen door as if it were linen cloth, she stepped her boots inside the kitchen, "Bernard, I don't know why you insist on staying in this old house all day." Her words reverberated through the delicate home. No reply came back.

That night, she showered, dressed in her long nightgown, and slipped into bed on her side, the right side, making sure not to bother the hem of the sheets over the top blanket. The blanket that she knitted for her and Bernard's wedding. The faded blue still held its original color between the stitches. She rolled to the empty pillow, caressed the soft cotton and whispered, "Good night, my sweet."

Before Gini's eyes opened to the sunrays streaming through the window, her phone rang. She threw off the covers like Zorro's cape and prepared herself for a fight. After the second ring, she realized it was someone calling. The third ring, she lifted the covers. She lifted her boots, the tissue box, her pillow. Fourth ring, fifth ring. Silence. Gini sighed and slouched on the side of the bed. It was the bank, she knew it. She wished she could flip open the phone and bark like a hound to scare them off. But, she just didn't have the will to fight, anymore.

Beep-Beep alerting of a voice mail, or a missed call, or maybe text message. She could never figure out those devices. She preferred when someone came over and sat down for a coffee when they wanted to talk. That's how it used to be. People used to talk. To each other. With their voices. While looking each other in the eyes. And took the time to sit to drink coffee together.

Yawning and stretching her arms into the air, she was in no hurry to answer the rings and the beeps of modern day. "Good morning, Bernard," she mumbled as she left the room to wash her face.

Placing her plate in the sink with scraps of scrambled egg and buttered toast with three bites out of it, on top of five other plates from the week, she suddenly remembered where she left her phone. The night before, she slipped her phone in her robe pocket, hung it on a nail, and stepped into the shower. Now, with the small oval phone clasped between her palms, it stayed dark as she snapped it open. "Dead," she grumbled. Shuffling back to the kitchen, she opened a drawer with cords snaking their way into thin, colorful

knots. Pulling at one cord after another, the whole jumbled jigsaw raised and lowered. Looking up on the shelf, next to a stack of unopened mail, the tines of the charger peeped at her. She smirked back at it, rammed the phone onto the charger, and waited for the battery symbol to light up.

Her hand rested on the desk, on top of an unopened A4 envelope. Briefly looking at it, she noticed the Post Office delivery date was months old. She read the word, “Mortuary” and her head snapped away from the rest of the address. Quickly she stood, starting toward the back yard. A knock at the door, and she ceased to move. Another knock. Her hands suspended like a mannequin. “Mrs. Walker?” Her breath held in her lungs, escaping in a dog-like growl. The last knock, then footsteps distancing from the porch.

The bank really meant to take the house, now. Like that fox, the bank picks off the poor and lonely one-by-one. Bernard was the one who knew where to send the checks. She hadn’t written a check, ever. The water and electricity she paid in cash from their savings jar. But, by the time she realized she hadn’t paid the house note, she thought the bank men would laugh her out onto the street. The last time boys laughed at her, she was 16 years-old. Bobby Wallace, the bully in her class, threw a tack strip in front of her bicycle tire. She lost control and landed straight in the pond. She could hear Bobby and his gang laughing as she careened into the muddy bank. Before she could lift herself up, a boy a few years older than them was walking down the street saw the whole thing. He grabbed Bobby by the neck and brought him over to her to apologize. Bobby tearfully did and the boy let him go, running away as fast as rabbits in a summer thunderstorm. Then the boy reached his hand out to Genevieve. “I’ll take care of you,” promised Bernard. After that, he’s cared for since. Her mommy passed when she was 14, leaving Gini to care for the house, her daddy, and their hound, Rufus. After she met Bernard, she let go of fighting and someone else figured things out. Her daddy stayed on with them until he passed a few years later.

Bernard had a head for business, as far as she was concerned. He’d be figuring things in the back room set up with a table for a desk, like an office. Suddenly, he’d come out and say, “Gini, we going out to eat and celebrate!” Lord knows where he got money, and even ordered pie for dessert. Then other times were lean. She knew she had to cook soup with no meat when he’d stay in the back room until after sundown. When he was up, he was in the clouds. When he was down, he’d come crashing to the ground like a rollercoaster. None of that bothered her. They had a roof, something to eat, and each other.

Now, she was left with a rusty bucket of a house and still owing the house note without even knowing where or how to send the check.

Opening the shed, a puff of dust went up like Hiroshima. She knew they had suitcases in there somewhere, a leftover from one of the trips to the clouds they went on together. The rollercoaster ride down, and they hid them away to keep for the next ride to the top.

She opened the bright pink suitcase on her bed and from a drawer packed a nightgown, some extra socks, and a few shirts. Staring at her from the headboard was a picture of her and Bernard on their wedding day. She had borrowed a simple, satin dress that was two sizes too big and cinched together at the waist with a satin bow. He wore a white shirt and his brother’s tie. The picture captured them after they said their vows. She looked up into his eyes; her head reached his shoulders. He held her waist with his hand softly on the small of her back as he looked on to some point in the distance.

Her fingers brushed the glass encasement. Noticing that it acted like a mirror, she could see her face now, sad and lonely, juxtaposed with her luminous face on her wedding day, forty years past. She laid the frame facedown in the suitcase and closed it. The clasp stuck open, so she used one of Bernard’s belts to secure it closed. Where she was going, she had no idea. The only thing she could figure was that she would have to leave or they would come and throw her out, maybe even take her to jail for defrauding on the bank note.

In the other room, her phone rang. She fixed in place. Only the hairs on her arms moved with goose bumps. Twice it rang. She tiptoed to the phone and looked at the number. Shirley, it read across the screen. Gini put the phone down and continued to survey the room for packable items. She didn't know what to take and what to leave. Nothing meant anything and everything meant everything all at the same time. Beep-beep of the voicemail sounded. This time she listened to it. "Gini, I've been trying you for weeks, now. Where have you been? I'm ready to get in the car and drive to your town to drag you out of the lake, if that's where you are. Geezuz, Gini, would you give me a call back. Thirty years we were neighbors and now I can't even . . . Well, you know my number. If you want to be left alone, then so be – " The voicemail timed out.

Gini left the phone on the shelf to charge. The house had stillness as if already abandoned. She turned to the kitchen. "Ring," the phone cut the silence like an air raid siren. Figuring it was Shirley calling back, she flipped the phone open, "Hello?" Gini questioned.

The man's voice cheered into the phone "Uh, Mrs. Walker? Mrs. Walker I'm so glad I got you on the phone. This is Ted Hayes from Union Federal. Mrs. Walker, you are a difficult woman to get ahold of – " Click. Gini shut the phone thinking he would say the worst. If she didn't let him say it, she would have the house that much longer.

Her head spinning like a carnival ride, Gini's held her head in her hands to stop the motion. Her feet barely moved to the screen door out to the back yard. She reached for the rocking chair and it barely caught her before she ended up flat on the wood planks. She saw the fox in the distance coming for the kittens, but she couldn't do anything to stop him. Her eyes raced from barn, to grass, and down to her faded jeans. Staring at the seams of the jeans, she thought about a world far away, in a factory where people hand sew seams in jeans, and go home to their families, with people surrounding them all the time. The only other living things she'd seen in the past half year are the cat, the kittens, and that darn fox. Her mind wandered to having to go to the market for food instead of leaving money in the mailbox for the grocer to drop by a bag on Thursdays. She looked around and said goodbye to the flowerpot with a crack in it. She said goodbye to the rake with three tines missing. She supposed that it was all just junk anyway.

A tear started down a familiar path to the corner of her mouth. Just then, a man dressed in all black appeared in her peripheral like some kind of death. She jumped up and grabbed the broken pot and threw it at him. Falling short by six feet, he pleaded, "Mrs. Walker, stop, please. I have some news for you."

She continued to pick up things to throw at him as she argued, "You're gonna take my house. Why don't you go suck the blood of someone who has something worth something?"

With two to-go cups in his hands, he pleaded, "Mrs. Walker, I brought you coffee. I have some news about Bernard."

Bernard? "What is it?" she asked holding a rake cocked like a baseball bat.

"Would, would you like a coffee? I guessed that you would take it black." He reached out his hand with the steaming coffee, a peace offering, and slowly stepped one foot in front of the other toward her. She lowered the rake, the weight of it slipping from her fingers.

"Mrs. Walker, Bernard has left some things in his Last Will and Testament that I need to go over with you." Mr. Hayes finally met her on the porch and placed the Styrofoam cup in her statue-like hands. He shuffled for a place to set down his coffee and decided on the wooden planks of the porch.

Reaching into his briefcase slung over his shoulder, he pulled out a file. "You see, Mrs. Walker, Mr. Walker had a Will – " She cut him off. "A Will?" She asked. "Why would he go and do something like that if he's already dead?"

Mr. Hayes explained, “Well. Well, Mrs. Walker, someone makes a Will *before* they die. It’s mainly for the living. To take care of their loved ones after they die. It says right here, ‘I Bernard Walker of sound mind and body . . .’”

She stopped listening to him, “To take care of... care of..” echoed in her head like a yell in the Grand Canyon.

“You see, Mrs. Walker,” pointing to the documents, “with the remainder of his life insurance policy, he has paid off the house and it’s signed over to you. All I need you to do is sign here to accept.”

“Wait, I haven’t paid in months.” She said.

“It’s already been paid. You don’t have to pay the bank anymore.” He handed over a photocopy. “Here is the deed. You are the owner.”

She took the document like a fine piece of silk. Forgetting she was holding a cup of coffee, she spilled some on the paper. “Oh, I’m so sorry, Mr. Hayes.” She said as she wiped off the coffee stain. Grabbing the hem of her shirt, she wiped off the remainder.

“It’s quite alright, Mrs. Walker. This is a copy. I left all the originals at the office.” He smiled seeing that she hadn’t understood quite fully what he was saying, “You’re taken care of. You don’t have to worry.”

A smile broke across her lips that hadn’t been there for months. Mr. Hayes relaxed and offered, “Perhaps we can write you up a Will.”

“Shoot, Mr. Hayes,” She smirked, “The only ones are those cats and that fox over there.”

Mr. Hayes looked around for the animals, “Well, that can also be arranged.”

Gini smirked at the absurdity of the idea. Mr. Hayes sipped his coffee while Gini swayed back and forth slowly in her rocking chair.

## The Tale of the Night Wanderer

By Bridget Matz  
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"Listen close, children, fathers, mothers, good people all. Listen to my tale of the Night Wanderer."

The crowd settled and hushed itself, gathered around the itinerant storyteller, who had arrived only that afternoon. Now it was twilight - the time for tales - and his voice brought silence in an instant.

"He is alone in the night," the storyteller began, "and that is all he knows. There has only ever been himself and the night, in his experience . . . the night is all.

"He roams the world forever, in the darkness, without rest or change - moving west, always west, compelled to flee some horror in the East. He does not know what the horror is, but when it approaches, the night-things whisper to him, *Run, run! It is gaining on you, on us, It will kill us both and destroy us utterly. Run, escape with us, that you might last a few hours more!* He hears the terror in them, and feels it in himself. And so he runs.

"What do you think he is running from, my children?"

The younger listeners furrowed their brows and whispered to each other, trying to guess the riddle. Then one boy looked up eagerly.

"The Sun comes from the East!" he said. "Is he running from the Sun?"

The storyteller nodded. "You have guessed it, boy. He does not know it himself, for he has forgotten there is such a thing as Morning. But he runs from the light of the Sun."

"But then he'd have to go faster than the Sun!" another child protested. "Around and around the world, forever."

"So he does. For the Night Wanderer is a part of the night, my listeners. It has filled him with its mystery, till he can hear the voices in the moonbeams and see the secrets in the shadows of the trees. He feels himself a part of that alien world we glimpse whenever we must leave home in the dark. He has become so much a part of it, that he travels as quickly as the Night, which always flees the Sun, and feels the same horror of day as the darkness does."

"Is he . . . a person?" one voice ventured.

The storyteller smiled darkly. "Perhaps. We know he was . . . once."

The crowd stirred and rustled, a rush of eager horror showing on its members' faces.

"Yes, he was a man once, like other men. Long, long ago. He was a young man who lived in village much like this one, with a trade and a home and a sweetheart. But the stories say that once, traveling to a larger town on some business, he had to sleep outside, by the side of the road, all one night - a thing many have done without harm, it is true, but still sometimes an unsafe thing. He saw something that night, or heard something, or felt it. The secrets of the Night touched him, and made him their own.

"It did not show in the daytime - he was still spirited and content with his life, then, his ordinary self. But after that night, his friends and family began to notice he grew restless and remote with twilight, and would wander instead of sleeping. He began to be found outside his home, and then outside the village, in the mornings - always farther west than he had been the night before. It came to the point where, at his own pleas, they locked him up each night to keep him safe. But one morning they found the doors all open, and

the young man vanished. And since then, the Night Wanderer has never been seen in that village, or in daylight, again."

His listeners shivered, in the chill of the gathering dusk. Someone asked, "Has he been seen at all?"

"Oh, yes, he has been seen. By travelers and wayfarers and such as must be abroad at night. But when they speak to him, they say, he stares strangely, and rarely replies. For he thinks himself a part of the Night. He has forgotten he is a man, who lives in the day and the night but stands apart from both in his own being.

"It is said by some that, if the Wanderer could be restrained to meet the sunrise, he might become himself again; and some have tried. But he is so swift and silent, like the dark, that none have ever kept him. Even now, he wanders in the night; and the night is all he knows."

The storyteller's voice dropped away into silence.

It was fully dark now, the stars mere specks of light in the black sky. And even as the audience dispersed to their homes - safe, familiar homes, full of firelight and warmth and humanity - they found themselves drawing close to one another, glancing fearfully at the surrounding darkness.